



Bavinck on the doctrine of election

In the outline of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck follows the usual sequence of doctrinal topics of Christian theology in the western tradition.¹ As we have seen in previous articles, after an introductory volume on theological *prolegomena*, which treats at considerable length the formal questions of the nature of theology as a science and the doctrine of divine revelation, Bavinck turns in his second volume to the doctrines of God and man. Within the sequence of topics treated in the doctrine of God, Bavinck considers the subject of this article, God's eternal counsel or will, only after a lengthy exposition of such topics as the knowability of God, the names of God, the incommunicable and communicable attributes of God, and the doctrine of the holy Trinity.

This sequence of topics within the doctrine of God reflects a pattern in the tradition of Western Christian theology that dates back to the medieval period and the great *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas. Though there have been exceptions to this rule in the Western theological tradition, Bavinck locates his consideration of the doctrine of God's counsel, including the election of His people to salvation in Christ, within the framework of the doctrine of God. Any true knowledge of the living and triune God, so far as it is derived from inscripturated revelation, must include a knowledge of the triune God's eternal plan or counsel. The triune God who is revealed to us in Scripture is the Lord of history, who realizes His sovereign plan and purpose from the creation of all things to their perfection at the consummation.

Distinguishing God's "Being" (who He is) from His "works" (what He freely does)

At the outset of his treatment of the divine counsel, Bavinck affirms a traditional distinction in Christian theology between the knowledge of God's *being* as such and the knowledge of God's *works* in relation to creation and history. Even though all human knowledge of the triune God must be derived from God's comprehensive revelation of Himself through His works and words, we must distinguish the knowledge of God as He *necessarily* and eternally exists, and the knowledge of God as He *voluntarily* chooses to act in respect to creation and history (*RD* 2:342). Human knowledge of God's names and attributes, as well as the "incommunicable attributes" of the persons of the holy Trinity, is knowledge of *who God is*. The knowledge of God's being is comprised of what can be known regarding who God eternally and immutably is in the fullness of His triune life. This knowledge of who God is concerns the "works of God as He is in Himself" (*opera Dei immanentia ad intra*). For example, to affirm God's holiness is to affirm that God is necessarily, immutably, and eternally holy, quite apart from His holy works in relation to the creation He chooses to call into existence and sovereignly rule. Whether the triune God of the Scriptures freely determines to create the world and realize His sovereign purposes in the course of history, God would eternally be who He is, lacking nothing, but possessing the fullness of infinite life and blessedness. In short, to be Who He is, God does not need the world, and His free decision to create the world and direct it to His appointed purposes does not "enrich" or change who He is. When we speak of God's attributes and of the Trinity, we are speaking of the God who is and ever shall be, world without end.

In addition to our knowledge of who God eternally *is*, we are also given in Scripture a knowledge of what God wills to do in all of His works that concern the creation, history, and the divinely-appointed end of all things. According to Bavinck, when we consider the topic of God's eternal counsel and will, we are focusing upon what God has revealed to us about His "*works*" in relation

to the entire creation and history. These works of God are works in which God, so to speak, "goes outside of Himself" in order to accomplish His purposes in creation and providence (RD 2:342).² In the history of Reformed theology, these works in which God "goes outside of Himself" (*opera Dei externa*) are distinguished into two kinds. First, we may speak of God's "inward works" or His plans or purposes. And second, we may speak of God's "outward works" or the ways in which He accomplishes His plans. According to Bavinck, we must distinguish "the works of God *ad intra* (inward) and the works of God *ad extra* (outward). The former are usually designated as 'decrees' and are all included in the one, eternal 'counsel of God' These decrees establish a connection between the immanent works of the divine being and the external works of creation and recreation" (RD 2:342). In the strictest sense, therefore, the doctrine of God's eternal counsel is based upon what the Scriptures teach regarding the works of God that have to do with God's purpose or plan for creation and recreation, but that remain inward or are to be distinguished from their realization in the course of the outworking of God's counsel in history.

Admittedly, the language Bavinck employs here belongs to the technical language of theology. However, the point Bavinck is making can be illustrated rather simply from human experience. Since there is an analogy between God as a tri-personal being and our persons as His image-bearers, we experience in a limited way what it means to speak of our works or actions as being of two kinds. On the one hand, we have "plans," "intentions," and "purposes." These plans may include such items as: going to college, getting married, purchasing a home, and the like. However, *there is a clear difference between our "plans" and their "execution."* It is one thing to purpose to do something; it is quite another actually to do it. One of the features of human life, especially in its broken and sinful condition, is that many of our plans tend to be frustrated or unrealized. Things often turn out rather differently from what we had planned (cf. "the best laid plans of mice and men..."). With God there is also a clear distinction between His "will" or "plan" and its "execution." But there is no hint that God's plans or purposes are ever unrealized or frustrated (Psalm 33:11; Proverbs 19:21; Isaiah 40:9b, 10; Ephesians 1:11; Romans 8:28). When Bavinck distinguishes God's works into two kinds, those that remain "within" Himself and those that involve God's going "outside" Himself, he is simply using rather technical language to describe the distinction between God's works that relate to His eternal plan or purpose and His works that relate to the execution or realization of His purpose in time. All of God's works, whether His eternal plan or its execution in time, belong to our knowledge of what God has freely chosen *to do*, not to our knowledge of what God always and necessarily *is*.

The characteristics of God's counsel or decree

Even though there is a similarity between God's plans and the plans of human beings who bear His image, there are obvious differences between them. In his treatment of God's counsel or decree(s), Bavinck observes that God's plans possess three general characteristics.

First, all the ideas or components of the divine decrees are "*derived from the fullness of knowledge that is eternally present in God*" (RD 2:342). God knows all things, whether "actual" or "possible." His knowledge is as inexhaustible and rich as His own being. What God knows about creation, providence and re-creation, therefore, is His knowledge of what will become "actual" by virtue of His free decision, but this knowledge is not as exhaustive as His knowledge of Himself and all that which is possible. Indeed, compared to the latter, God's knowledge of what belongs to His decrees, however rich and comprehensive it may seem to us, is but a "*sketch, a summary, of the depths of both God's wisdom and knowledge*" (RD 2:343). God knows perfectly and completely all that is "actual," because He has willed to create and make all things what they are. But God's knowledge is infinitely greater than His knowledge of what comes to pass in accordance with His eternal counsel.

Second, all of God's decrees are based upon "*His absolute sovereignty*" and freedom (RD 2:343). God is under no compulsion so far as His divine counsel is concerned. In His self-sufficiency, God does not need the world or find Himself compelled to call the creation into existence in order to enrich Himself (Acts 17:25). In this connection, we must sharply distinguish God's "knowledge of

Himself" which is necessary to Who He is, and God's "knowledge of the world." which is based upon His freedom to determine how He will act in respect to the creation and history.

And third, a distinction must be drawn between God's decrees and their realization in history. There is a difference between what God in His counsel determines, and what must necessarily follow in the course of the realization of His counsel in history. Even though God's decrees are free and sovereignly determined, when it comes to their realization in the course of history, we must affirm that *"in due time they will be realized"* (RD 2:343).

In the setting of his treatment of these characteristics of God's counsel and decree, Bavinck offers a broad survey of the controversy in the history of Christian theology regarding this topic. In the early church, the church father, Augustine, expounded the doctrine of God's eternal counsel in opposition to the error of Pelagius. Against Pelagius' insistence upon a certain view of human freedom, which limited the scope of God's sovereign counsel and purpose, Augustine insisted that Scriptural teaching clearly views God's counsel to encompass all things (Genesis 50:20; Psalm 139:16; Isaiah 45:7; Acts 2:23; Ephesians 1:11). In his summary of Scriptural teaching regarding God's decrees and the historical dispute between an Augustinian and Pelagian conception of God's counsel, Bavinck observes that the New Testament provides a more clear and precise disclosure of the doctrine than the Old, though the teaching of the entire Scripture is consistent regarding the sovereign purposes of God and their realization in the course of creation and recreation. He also notes that the Augustinian doctrine of God's divine counsel has been the predominant and preferred view throughout the history of the church. In this doctrine, the eternal counsel of God includes the fore-ordination of all things, including the salvation and the non-salvation of those who belong to the fallen human race. Though this view was modified in a "semi-Pelagian" direction during the medieval period of scholastic theology, it was restored to greater purity by the Reformers, Luther and Calvin, during the sixteenth century, only to be abandoned or corrupted by later Lutheran and Arminian constructions.

In all forms of Pelagian or semi-Pelagian teaching, the counsel or decree of God is limited by the choices of human beings who act at some point without any direct reference to God's fore-ordination. Because Pelagius and his followers affirm a certain human freedom or autonomy, which may be exercised independently of God's will or purpose, they are obliged to place a limit upon the scope of God's counsel or decree. Oftentimes, this limit actually means that God in His counsel simply "ratifies" or knows beforehand what human beings will choose to do. In this view, you might say that history is the teacher and God becomes merely a kind of "student" who learns what will transpire as it Occurs.

One interesting feature of Bavinck's handling of the history of dogmatic reflection on the decrees of God is his extensive treatment of the historic debate among Reformed theologians regarding the "order" of God's decrees. In the course of Reformed theology, some theologians adopted what is termed a "supra-lapsarian" view of this order, while others (the majority) adopted what is termed an "infra-lapsarian" view.

"Supra-lapsarianism" is the view of the logical order of the elements of God's decree of predestination that places the decree to elect and not elect "before" (therefore, *supra* or "above") the decree to permit the fall. "Infralapsarianism" is the view that places the decree to elect and not elect "after" (therefore, *infra* or "under") the decree to permit the fall. Supralapsarianism appeals to the principle that "what is first in intention is last in execution" (*quod primum est in intentione, ultimum est in executione ultime*). If God's intention was to glorify Himself through the salvation of the elect and the non-salvation of the reprobate, then this, according to the supralapsarian, must have first place in His eternal counsel. Just as a builder begins with a sketch of the finished building in his mind, so it is with God. Infralapsarianism, by contrast, views the order of God's decrees from the ordinary Scriptural presentation, which assumes the fallen state of humanity as the occasion, even within God's eternal counsel, for the divine plan to save the elect. Bavinck's careful discussion of the differences between supra-lapsarianism and infra-lapsarianism, which includes a delineation of the relative merits and demerits of each view, likely reflects the debates

of his period that were often associated with the name of Abraham Kuyper, who favored the supra-lapsarian view, though not without some qualification.³

In Bavinck's judgment, there are arguments, pro and con, that can be adduced for both positions, though Bavinck himself opts for a position that views the distinct components of God's counsel in their organic unity rather than in terms of their logical or temporal precedence. In Bavinck's judgment, the decree or counsel of God is an organic unity, and is not subject to the human limits of a logical or temporal order.

Predestination and God's purpose of election

For our purpose, the most significant part of Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of the divine counsel is his definition of the nature of God's decree(s) in general, and his respective definitions of election and reprobation. Bavinck broadly defines the decree or counsel of God as *"His eternal plan for all that exists or will happen in time"* (RD 2:372). Despite the important differences of understanding that have marked the history of theological reflection upon God's counsel, Bavinck notes how all Christian theology acknowledges to a greater or lesser degree that history unfolds in accordance with God's sovereign plan or will. Neither pantheism, which identifies what occurs in history with the being of God, nor deism, which views the world's history in relative independence from God's will, are satisfactory viewpoints from the standpoint of historic Christian theism. The counsel of God must be viewed to comprehend *"all things that exist or will occur"* (RD 2:373). To exclude anything from the scope of God's eternal counsel would compromise God's independent existence and work as the Creator and Lord of all things. Whatever transpires in creation and in the whole subsequent course of providence and re-creation must be encompassed within the decree of God. Moreover, the decree of God reflects the nature of its Author, such that we should think of this decree as *"the eternally active will of God, the willing and deciding God Himself, not something accidental in God, but one with His being, as His eternally active will"* (RD 2:373). Like the artist who can only *"execute his vision in stages,"* so God executes His one, complex counsel in a series of temporal phases that reveal His nature and purpose (RD 2:374).

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

While the name does not matter so much, what is important is that the decree of God encompasses all things, not just the determination of the eternal state of rational creatures (predestination), but the ordering and ranking of all things without exception. Predestination, accordingly, was not something considered in isolation, but was a part of God's decree for all things and only a particular application of it ... Predestination is providence insofar as it concerns the eternal destiny of humans and angels. (RD 2:375)

The doctrine of predestination, therefore, sets forth the Scriptures' teaching regarding God's plan to save or not to save human beings who bear His image.

Though Pelagianism has historically denied predestination as a component of God's all-comprehensive counsel for fear that it undermines the genuine freedom and responsibility of the creature, Bavinck maintains that Pelagianism is at odds with Scriptural teaching, the history of Christian theology, and human experience. However difficult the problem of the relation between God's counsel and creaturely responsibility, we must maintain that *"by the infinitely majestic activity of His knowing and willing, (God) does not destroy but instead creates and maintains the freedom and independence of His creatures"* (RD 2:377). Pelagianism finally amounts to a denial of the Christian doctrine of creation, since it asserts that the creature may call into existence an act that is strictly unrelated to God and His will. Moreover, since the Pelagian doctrine of freedom posits an act that is unrelated to God's will or determined by any antecedent factor(s), it also undermines the foundation for God's "foreknowledge." Even God is incapable of knowing in advance an act that is

absolutely indeterminate. In Pelagianism, *"God's decree has become completely conditional and has lost its character as will and decree. It is nothing more than a wish whose fulfillment is totally uncertain. God looks on passively and adopts an attitude of waiting; humans decide. Caprice and chance sit on the throne"* (RD 2:382).

Election and reprobation

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

In his consideration of the doctrine of reprobation, Bavinck emphasizes that it is supported by the frequent testimony of Scripture that God's works out His will and purpose in all circumstances, including such circumstances as sin, unbelief, death, and eternal punishment (Romans 8:28ff.; Romans 9:19-23). In all circumstances and events, even in the unbelief and condemnation of sinners who do not find salvation in Christ, God is actively accomplishing His inscrutable, wise, and just purposes (Ephesians 1:11). Despite the apparent attraction of a Pelagian denial of a decree of reprobation, which expresses God's purpose not to save some human beings or angels, Reformed theology must accept the teaching of the Word of God that the will and hand of God are expressed in everything that happens. Without pretending to offer a solution to every problem, or a simple explanation of what appears dreadful to human insight, Calvinism *"invites us humans to rest in Him [God] who dwells in unapproachable light, whose judgments are unsearchable, and whose paths are beyond tracing out"* (RD 2:395). Even the non-salvation of some must be regarded as an outworking of God's eternal counsel.

However, Bavinck also observes that the decree of reprobation does not fit within the will and counsel of God in the same manner as the decree of election. The power and will of God in the decree of reprobation may not be affirmed at the expense of a proper view of God's justice. After all, we know from Scripture that, though sin is *"not outside the will of God, it is definitely against it"* (RD 2:396). Though sin may not be the *"efficient or impelling cause of the decree of reprobation"* — if it were, all sinners would be reprobated — it is *"the sufficient cause and definitely the meriting cause of eternal punishment"* (RD 2:396). The decree of reprobation undoubtedly has, as do all things, its ultimate cause within the will of God; but the act of reprobation never takes place apart from sin and culpability on the part of those who are not saved. There is not an exact parallel, therefore, between God's decree of reprobation and His decree of election.

Unlike the work of reprobation, the work of election is one in which God takes particular delight (Ezekiel 18:23; 33:11; Ephesians 1:3-4; Romans 8:28-30; 2 Peter 3:9). In His purpose to grant salvation to some wholly and exclusively upon the basis of His grace, God acts in a manner that mirrors His perfections and achieves His culminating and consummate purpose. In reply to the Pelagian objection that particular election is unjust, Bavinck notes that all would be lost were salvation a matter of justice.

"But now that election operates according to grace, there is hope even for the most wretched. If work and reward were the standard of admission into the kingdom of heaven, its gates would be opened for no one ... Pelagianism has no pity."

(RD 2:402)

The sheer grace of divine election is the only basis for hope on the part of sinners who are incapable, because unwilling, to embrace Christ for salvation.

Furthermore, though it is often objected that election undermines the invitation of the gospel to respond to Christ in faith and repentance, Bavinck observes that no one has the right to conclude that he is outside the reach of God's electing grace.

*"No one has a **right** to believe that he or she is a reprobate, for everyone is sincerely and urgently called to believe in Christ with a view to salvation. No one **can** actually believe it, for one's own life and all that makes it enjoyable is proof that God takes no delight in His death. No one **really** believes it, for that would be hell on earth."*

(RD 2:402)

When it comes to the objects of God's decree of election, Bavinck observes that these objects include Christ and those who belong to His body, the church. Christ is appointed within the decree of election to be the Mediator and Redeemer of all those who are His members by faith. For this reason, the knowledge of election is always joined to faith in its embrace of the gospel promise in Christ. Moreover, it is not God's goal to elect simply an "aggregate of individuals" who are saved through the mediation of Christ. The goal and outcome of God's decree of election is nothing less than a renewed humanity in union with Christ. The elect represent in the purpose of God the realization of a new and glorified humanity in whom the entire organism of the human race is contemplated. In His decree of election, God loves not a loose collection of individuals but an organism that represents and consummates His love for the whole world (RD 2:404).

Summary

As a Reformed theologian, Bavinck begins his treatment of God's works with an extended discussion of the divine counsel or decree of the triune God. All of the works of God in relation to His creation, its history and ultimate consummation, are of two kinds: first, God's inward plans or purposes for the creation, which is the subject of God's eternal counsel and will; and second, God's realization of His sovereign purposes throughout the whole course of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. The triune God of the Scriptures reveals Himself as a personal God Who has plans for His creatures that will infallibly be accomplished. God is not bystander or student of history; He is the sovereign Lord of history who realizes His wondrous and inscrutable counsel without any prospect of frustration or failure. Contrary to all Pelagian or semi-Pelagian doctrines, which idolize a certain kind of human freedom that denies or diminishes God's sovereignty, the Bible teaches that God is the wise Creator of all things, the sovereign Lord of history, the gracious Savior of His people, and the just avenger of human sin and disobedience. The biblical teaching is that God's free counsel and decree are the all-encompassing source of all things. For Bavinck, as for Reformed theologians throughout history, this teaching is not the fearful occasion for despair or discouragement, but the most glorious consolation. For it finds its heart and goal in God's free decision from all eternity to save the elect in Christ, and to constitute the elect a new humanity that will live forever in His blessed presence, serving and worshipping Him as the God of creation and redemption, the Alpha and the Omega.

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¹ In the abridged, popular version of his dogmatics, *Our Reasonable Faith*, Bavinck does not devote a separate chapter to the doctrine of election, but briefly treats the "counsel of God" as the basis and source for all of God's redemptive and re-creative work in history by means of the covenant of grace. Within the eternal counsel of God, there are three related components: God's gracious purpose of election; the achievement of the redemption of the elect through the eternal "counsel of redemption" in which the Son is appointed to be the head and representative of his people in the accomplishment of their redemption; and the divine appointment of the Holy Spirit as the One who will work out and apply the redemption of Christ to those whom God purposes to save.

² The technical language Bavinck employs to distinguish these works or "operations" of the triune God is common to the tradition of Reformed theology. For definitions of the traditional understanding of these terms, see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), pp. 211-13.

³ It is instructive to note that Bavinck shares Kuyper's criticism of the older views of the elements in God's decree of election, namely, that they did not give special place to God's purpose in creation but subordinated creation entirely to God's purpose to save the elect.