



## Bavinck on the doctrine of the covenant

In Bavinck's view of God's counsel or decree, the doctrine of election deals with God's eternal purpose to save his people in Christ. In his purpose of election, God intends nothing less than the redemption of a new humanity within the context of his comprehensive work of recreation. In Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of the covenant in distinction from that of election, he focuses upon the manner in which God accomplishes his purposes for human beings in the course of history before and especially after the fall into sin.

Bavinck treats the doctrine of the covenant primarily in two places in his dogmatics. The first occasion for a consideration of the covenant between the triune God and human beings follows Bavinck's consideration of the creation of man in God's image. The covenant is not to be regarded merely as a post-fall means whereby God restores fallen sinners to fellowship with himself. Rather, the covenant is the divinely appointed instrument whereby from creation onward the triune God chooses to enjoy communion with his image-bearers. The second occasion, which provides a considerably more lengthy treatment of the doctrine of the covenant of grace, is Bavinck's introduction to the doctrine of the person and work of Christ.

As was true of our summary of Bavinck's handling of the doctrine of election, our summary of his doctrine of the covenant will only identify the most important features of Bavinck's view. Once we have a clear sense of Bavinck's respective doctrines of election and covenant, we will take up the critical issue of their interrelation.

### **The covenant with Adam ("covenant of works")**

Bavinck introduces his discussion of the covenant before the fall into sin between the triune God and all of humanity in Adam by noting that, in the original state of integrity, Adam did not possess the image of God in isolation from the organic unity of the human race. Nor did Adam possess immediately the image of God in the fullest sense. In the scriptural conception of humanity, a clear distinction is evident between Adam and Christ, the second or last Adam. Even in the state of his original integrity, the first Adam did not yet possess the fullness of life that is only secured through Christ in the final state of glory. *"As such, Adam, by comparison to Christ, stood on a lower level. Adam was the first; Christ the second and the last. Christ presupposes Adam and succeeds him. Adam is the lesser and inferior entity; Christ the great and higher being. Hence, Adam pointed to Christ; already before the fall he was the type of Christ. In Adam's creation Christ was already in view"* (RD 2:564). This relationship between the first Adam and Christ, the last Adam, is of special importance to a proper understanding of the original covenantal relationship between God and humanity. Only through the work of Christ, the second Adam, does the fullness of God's dwelling and communion with humanity — first given in the original covenant relationship between God and man before the fall — find its eschatological realization and fulfillment.

In his introductory comments on the pre-fall covenant relationship, Bavinck observes that the doctrine of the pre-fall covenant is based upon several scriptural and theological themes that have deep roots in the history of Christian theology.

In the scriptural representation of Adam's relationship with God before the fall, it is apparent that Adam's condition was *"provisional and temporary and could not remain as it was. It either had to pass on to higher glory or to sin and death"* (RD 2:564). When Adam was placed by God under a probationary command of obedience (Genesis 2:16-17), he was threatened with death in the event of his transgression, and he was simultaneously promised a reward of life in the event of his

obedience to this command. The reward of eternal life that was set before Adam is consistently regarded throughout the Scriptures as the goal and outcome of the original covenant and as well the covenant of grace (cf. Romans 6:23; Revelation 2:7).

Even though the express language of "covenant" is not used in the Genesis account of Adam's relationship with his triune Creator, Bavinck notes that it may be termed a covenant in Hosea 6:7, and it is certainly the case that the apostle Paul draws a clear parallel between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21. Just as the disobedience of the first Adam brings condemnation and death to the whole human race whom he represented as covenant head, so the obedience of Christ brings justification and life to those whom he represented as covenant head in the covenant of grace. In the history of Reformed theology, the formulation of the relationship between God and Adam in terms of the idea of covenant was largely based upon theological reflection that sought to do justice to this parallel between Adam and Christ. Though Christian theology did not always recognize the implications of this parallel for the formulation of the original relationship between God and Adam as a covenant relationship, it was always implicit in the longstanding tradition since Augustine of distinguishing Adam's state before the fall and the believer's state in Christ after the fall. The Augustinian distinction between Adam's ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*) and not to die (*posse non mori*) before the fall, and the inability to sin and die (*non posse peccare et mori*) that is graciously granted to the elect in Christ, requires the formulation of a pre- and post-fall covenant (RD 2:566-7).

In the history of Reformed theology, the pre-fall covenant between God and humanity in Adam has been variously designated. Sometimes it is termed a "covenant of nature," since this covenant required obedience to the moral law of God that man knew by nature and was able to obey by virtue of the created gifts and integrity with which he was originally endowed. However, it is most commonly designated a "covenant of works" since the eternal life promised in the covenant was only able to be obtained *"in the way of works, that is, in the way of keeping God's commandments"* (RD 2:567). Bavinck admits that the terminology of a pre-fall "covenant of works" is not employed in the Reformed confessions as it is in the Westminster Standards. However, the absence of this terminology does not alter the fact that all of the elements or components of the doctrine are present "materially" in Articles 14 and 15 of the Belgic Confession, in Lord's Days 3 and 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism, and in Head of Doctrine III/IV of the Canons of Dort. In these confessional articles, clear testimony is provided of the original state of humanity in Adam, the obligation of perfect obedience to the law of God, the promise of life upon condition of such obedience, and the consequence of Adam's sin and fall for the whole human race. Because Adam transgressed the covenant, he forfeited for himself and all his posterity any possibility of eternal life in unbreakable communion with God. Now the only way to obtain such life is through faith in Christ, the last Adam, who alone is able to grant the fullness of glorified life to those who belong to him. In Bavinck's estimation, the fact that the Scriptures do not explicitly term the pre-fall state as a "covenant" relationship should not deter Reformed theologians from employing this term. In the Scriptures, it is common to speak of "covenant" as the *"fixed form in which the relation of God to his people is depicted and presented"* (RD 2:560). Therefore, however much the word may be in dispute, it ought to be acknowledged that the "matter is certain" (*de vocabulo dubitetur, re salvo*).

After his introductory comments on the propriety of viewing the original pre-fall relationship between God and man as a covenant, Bavinck offers several significant arguments for regarding all of the triune God's dealings with his image-bearers as covenantal in nature. The doctrine of a pre-fall covenant of works expresses a truth that is basic to the whole teaching of Scripture, namely, that *"(a)mong rational and moral creatures all higher life takes the form of a covenant"* (RD 2:568). Whether in marriage, family, business, science or art, human social relationships and interaction invariably take the form of covenants in which there is mutual obligation and inter-communion. This is no less true of the highest and all-embracing relationship that obtains between God as Creator and man as his creature and image-bearer. Indeed, there is no possible way whereby human beings could enjoy blessedness in fellowship with God other than by way of a covenant relationship.

In the first place, the "infinite distance" that obtains between God as Creator and man as creature confirms that there is no possibility of communion with God without covenant. In order for God to commune with his image-bearer, not only as a "master" to "servant" but also as "Father" to "son," he must *"come down from his lofty position, condescend to his creatures, impart, reveal, and give himself away to human beings"* (RD 2:569).

In the second place, the idea of covenant always implies a relationship of mutual obligation and commitment. As a mere creature, however, man does not possess of himself any "rights" before God. The creature may never place the Creator in his debt or under obligation, unless God first freely and graciously grants him rights within the context of a covenant relationship. *"There is no such thing," Bavinck argues, "as merit in the existence of a creature before God, nor can there be since the relation between the Creator and the creature radically and once-for-all eliminates any notion of merit. This is true after the fall but no less before the fall"* (RD 2:570).<sup>1</sup> In the pre-fall covenant as well as the covenant of grace after the fall, God grants, by virtue of his condescending goodness and unmerited favor, rights and privileges that would otherwise be beyond man's reach.

And in the third place, Bavinck argues that the idea of covenant corresponds to the nature of man as a moral and rational creature, whom God treats and with whom he interacts in a way that respects the unique capacity of his image-bearer to respond to God in the way of free and heartfelt obedience (RD 2:570-1). In all of his dealings with his image-bearers, God never treats human beings as he would an irrational or inanimate object. The beauty of the covenant is that it provides a framework within which a fully personal and responsible engagement may transpire between God and human beings, which is similar to the engagement of a husband and wife, or of a parent and child.

Bavinck argues, in the concluding section of his consideration of the pre-fall covenant, that Reformed theology alone has adequately captured the biblical understanding of this covenant. In historic Roman Catholic theology, the doctrine of man's state before the fall included the idea that God as Creator added to man's natural state the "free gift" (*donum superadditum*) of original righteousness and the promise of eternal life. Though this idea bears some formal resemblance to the Reformed understanding of the covenant of works and rightly acknowledges that eternal life remains an "unmerited gift of God's grace," it differs from the Reformed view by its radical distinction between nature and grace and particularly by its reintroduction of the idea of "condign merit" in the context of man's free cooperation with God (RD 2:571-2). In the Reformed conception of the pre-fall covenant, greater recognition is given to God's sovereign initiative in the "unilateral" origin of the covenant relationship and in his gracious promise of eternal life. In the Reformed view, man as creature remains wholly dependent upon his Creator and finds a greater blessedness of glorious communion with God only in the way of obedience to the moral law of God.

Moreover, unlike the traditional view of Lutheran theology, namely, that Adam possessed in his original state of integrity the "highest possible blessing," the Reformed view never exaggerated the original state of Adam. In the Reformed conception, which alone does justice to the emphasis upon covenant as the means of communion and blessing for man in relationship to God, salvation in Christ brings more than the restoration through the forgiveness of sins of fallen man to his original state (RD 2:572). Rather, through the work of the last Adam, all who belong to him by faith and participate in the blessings of his saving work are granted the fullness of glory in the immutable state that is eternal life. Only in the Reformed conception do we find a proper understanding of the parallel between the first Adam and Christ.

Christ does not (merely) restore his own to the state of Adam before the fall. He acquired and bestows much more, namely, that which Adam would have received had he not fallen. He positions us not at the beginning but at the end of the journey that Adam had to complete. He accomplished not only the passive but also the active obedience required; he not only delivers us from guilt and punishment, but out of grace immediately grants us the right to eternal life. (RD 2:573)

An interesting feature of Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of the pre-fall covenant is an emphasis that we previously observed in his consideration of the doctrine of election. Just as God's purpose of election terminates not upon an aggregate of individuals but upon the whole organism of a new

humanity in Christ, so God's intention in the covenant is to bring the whole of humanity to its appointed destiny in unbroken and glorious communion with himself. The image of God, which Adam possessed but in a less than-perfect or consummate form, is only fully expressed in the whole human race in its organic unity. Adam was not created alone or as an isolated individual, but he was created and ordained by God to be the covenant representative of the whole human race. God's journey with mankind begins with Adam, but this beginning is not to be confused with God's intended goal, which was that his image would be perfectly expressed only in his "fully finished image." *"Only humanity in its entirety — as one complete organism, summed up under a single head, spread out over the whole earth, as prophet proclaiming the truth of God, as priest dedicating itself to God, as ruler controlling the earth and the whole of creation — only it is the fully finished image, the most telling and striking likeness of God"* (RD 2:577).

The whole of humanity was by God's ordinance united both juridically and ethically in the first Adam. Therefore, by virtue of Adam's sin and fall, the entire human race has come under the judicial sentence of condemnation and death, and all of Adam's posterity has inherited a sinfully corrupted human nature. This also provides an explanation for the unity of God's covenant with humanity, whether before the fall in the first Adam or after the fall in the last Adam. Christ, who is the one Mediator of the covenant of grace, is the "antitype" of the first Adam. By virtue of Christ's mediatorial work of perfect obedience to the Father and substitutionary endurance of the penalty of violating the law of God, all those who belong to Christ by faith constitute the new humanity in which God's original and abiding purpose is realized. In Christ believers are restored to union and communion with God, and upon the basis of his entire and perfect obedience are entitled to eternal life in consummate blessedness. Thus, Bavinck concludes that *"(t)he covenant of works and the covenant of grace stand and fall together. The same law applies to both"* (RD 2:579). In the overarching purpose of God, Christ is the appointed Mediator who redresses all of the consequences of Adam's sin and transgression, and procures for believers the fullness of their covenant inheritance, which is life in unbreakable and perfected communion with the living God.

### **The covenant of grace**

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

As the language of "covenant of *grace*" clearly indicates, the first principal feature of this covenant in its historical manifestation is that it reveals God's favor and disposition to enter into renewed communion with undeserving and fallen sinners. Through the sin and disobedience of Adam under the pre-fall covenant of works, all of his posterity has been plunged into ruin and despair. There is no way back to communion with God by the covenant of works. However, God in his undeserved grace takes the initiative, immediately after the fall into sin, to restore his fallen image-bearers to union and communion with himself. In this the uniqueness of the Christian religion is exhibited over against all forms of paganism. Rather than the fallen creature working to enter into communion with God, the great emphasis of biblical teaching rests upon the initiatives of God's grace in coming to his fallen creatures to redeem them from the consequences of their sin and misery. *"(I)n Scripture the grace of God comes out to meet us in all its riches and glory. Special revelation again*

*makes God known to us as a Being who stands, free and omnipotent, above nature and has a character and will of his own" (RD 3:197). Because Adam transgressed the law of God and forfeited for himself and his posterity any right under the original covenant to obtain the inheritance of life in communion with God, the grace of God after the fall always comes to expression in the form of a new and gracious covenant that "arises, not by a natural process, but by a historical act and hence gives rise to a rich history of grace" (RD 3:197).*

Following a long-standing tradition in Reformed theology, Bavinck appeals to the account of God's dealings with Adam after the fall in Genesis 3, especially verse 15, as the first and embryonic revelation of the covenant of grace in history. Indeed, though the terminology of covenant is not found in this passage, it contains in seed-form something of a foreshadowing of the entire history of the covenant of grace and its ultimate realization in Christ, the true "seed of the woman," who would finally crush all opposition to and enmity against God. When God comes to Adam after the fall, he pronounces his curse, to be sure, but he does so in the context of a promise of blessing that triumphs over human sin. Through the fall into sin, Adam and Eve, in a manner of speaking, "covenanted" with Satan, the archenemy of God. Through the "mother promise" of Genesis 3:15, however, God declares that he will break the bond of fellowship between Satan and the seed of the woman, his people, and join this people to himself in an irrevocable communion of life and blessing. In doing so, *"God graciously annuls it (the covenant between Adam and the power of evil), puts enmity between the seed of the serpent and the woman's seed, brings the seed of the woman — humanity, that is — back to his side, hence declaring that from Eve will spring a human race and that that race, though it will have to suffer much in the conflict with that evil power, will eventually triumph" (RD 3:199).* In the promise made to Adam, God assures him of the continued propagation, development and salvation of the human race. When Adam embraces this promise with childlike faith, God reckons his faith to him as righteousness. And so begins the course of redemptive history, which is the history of God's work of salvation in Christ and by means of the covenant of grace.

Though it is not germane to our purpose to provide a complete account of Bavinck's tracing of the covenant of grace throughout history, it is significant that Bavinck, also following the tradition of earlier Reformed covenant theology, gives special attention to the meaning of the language of "covenant" in the Scriptures. Contrary to the trajectory of critical biblical scholarship in his day, which often argued that the theme of covenant emerges for the first time late in the history of Israel, Bavinck maintains that the idea of the covenant emerges at the inception of God's work of redemption. Upon the basis of a careful analysis of the usage of the Old Testament term for "covenant" (*berith*), Bavinck concludes that, when it refers to God's covenanting with his people, it contains three principal features: *"an oath or promise that includes the stipulations agreed upon, a curse that invokes divine punishment upon the violator of the covenant, and a cultic ceremony that represents the curse symbolically" (RD 3:203).* When God enters into covenant with his people, he establishes a relationship of fellowship with himself that, by virtue of the accompanying oath of self-malediction, places his people *"under the protection of God and so achieves a kind of indissolubility" (RD 3:203).*

To the question whether the covenant relationship is a kind of mutual "agreement" between parties (bilateral) or a sovereign disposition or grant (unilateral), Bavinck answers that it depends upon how we view the nature of the covenant parties. Since the covenant of grace is initiated and sovereignly established by God, it must be regarded as entirely unilateral in its origin and administration. God graciously bestows his covenant blessing upon his people, imposes simultaneously the obligations of the covenant, and upholds the covenant in faithfulness in spite of the faltering and unfaithfulness of his people.

In this firmness and steadiness of the covenant of grace lies the glory of the religion we as Christians confess...

*If religion is to be a true fellowship between God and humanity, fellowship in which not only God but also the human partner preserves his or her independence as a rational and moral being and along with his or her duties also receives rights, this can come into being by God's*

*coming down to humans and entering into a covenant with them. In this action God obligates himself with an oath to grant the human partner eternal salvation despite his apostasy and unfaithfulness, but by the same token, the human partner on his or her part is admonished and obligated to a new obedience, yet in such a way that 'if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins we must not despair of God's mercy, nor continue in sin: since we have an everlasting covenant of grace with God. (RD 3:204-5)*

Because the covenant of grace is unilateral in origin and ultimately rendered effective unto salvation by virtue of God's abiding faithfulness, the most common rendering of the Hebrew term in the Septuagint is *diatheke* ("disposition") and not *suntheke* ("agreement") (RD 3:205). This linguistic convention confirms that the covenant is ultimately a sovereign bestowal of God whose faithfulness ensures the inviolability of the covenant relationship and guarantees that its promises will be realized in spite of the frequent infidelity of God's people. In this connection, Bavinck also observes that, though the language of the covenant is only infrequently rendered by the term "testament" which suggests the guarantee of the reception of an inheritance upon the death of the testator, the biblical understanding of the covenant of grace includes the idea of a "testamentary disposition." In the sovereign working of God, Israel's unfaithfulness did not prevent the God of the covenant from gathering in her place *"the spiritual Israel, which according to God's election was gathered from all peoples, receives the goods of salvation from the Son as by a testamentary disposition, stands in a child-Father relation to God, and expects salvation from heaven as an inheritance"* (RD 3:206).

In Bavinck's understanding of the teaching of Scripture, the doctrine of the covenant is of central and abiding importance. From the beginning to the culmination of God's dealings with human beings, communion and fellowship between the triune God and his people has always been mediated by way of covenant. In the pre-fall relationship between God and the human race in Adam, the covenant head and representative of all his posterity, God sovereignly (without any human deserving) placed Adam in a relationship of union and communion with himself. In doing so, God treated Adam, whom he created as a moral and rational (and, therefore, responsible) creature, not merely as a servant but also as a son. In the administration of this covenant relationship, God required from Adam perfect conformity to his moral law, promised him eternal life in unbroken communion with himself upon such obedience, and threatened him with (spiritual and physical) death in the event of his disobedience. In the original covenant relationship between God and Adam, we already see that God's intention for the human race was to be realized only in the way of a covenant of friendship and communion between himself and his people. Though the pre-fall covenant was only a beginning and not the perfection of this covenant fellowship, it already prefigured the fullness of human life in unbroken, eternal life communion with God.

In Bavinck's understanding of the pre-fall covenant, Adam was only a "type" of Christ, the last Adam, in whom God's intention for fellowship between himself and his people would ultimately be realized. After the fall into sin, all of Adam's posterity were subjected to God's just condemnation and spiritual death. Only through the work of Christ, the Mediator of the covenant of grace, is it now possible for any of the sons and daughters of Adam to be restored to covenant favor and fellowship with God, and to be the rightful recipients of the covenant inheritance of eternal life. Christ, the last Adam, is the One through whom a new humanity will be restored and perfected in fellowship with God. Despite the sinfulness and unworthiness of his people, the triune God has graciously condescended in Christ to obtain the perfection of glorified life for his people in the covenant. Through his perfect and entire obedience, both to the positive precepts and the negative sanctions of the law, Christ has secured for those who are joined to him by faith the blessings of acceptance into favor with God and the sure promise of unbroken fellowship with him. In this way, the covenant of grace is the means whereby the triune God intends to realize his purpose for the renewed organism of the human race.

After his general treatment of the importance of the covenant of grace to the biblical understanding of redemption, Bavinck devotes the remainder of his consideration of the doctrine of the covenant to five topics:

1. a survey of the history of the development of the doctrine of the covenant in Christian, and particularly, Reformed theology;
2. a relatively brief description of the doctrine of a "covenant of redemption" (*pactum salutis*);
3. the distinction between the covenant of grace in its broader and narrower sense;
4. the unity and differences between the various administrations of the covenant of grace throughout redemptive history, especially the difference between the "old" and "new" covenant;
5. the relation between the pre-fall covenant of works and the post-fall covenant of grace; and
6. the relation between election and covenant. Not all of these topics are of equal importance to an understanding of Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant. However, before taking up directly Bavinck's view of the relation of covenant and election, we need to consider the topics of the "covenant of redemption and the relation between the covenants before and after the fall of Adam into sin.

### **The "covenant of redemption"** (*Pactum Salutis*)

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

In his reflection upon the doctrine of the "covenant of redemption," Bavinck affirms the essential components of the traditional formulation, though he also expresses some misgivings regarding what he terms the "scholastic subtlety" of some of its expressions (*RD* 3:213). In spite of some questionable appeal to scriptural texts such as Zechariah 6:13 and the use of extra-biblical legal categories drawn from the realm of traditional jurisprudence, Bavinck affirms that the principal components of the traditional doctrine express a scriptural idea. Within the life and communion of the three Persons of the Trinity, we may posit the existence of a compact or agreement (a true *suntheke* or mutual concurrence of will and purpose) between the Father, who appoints the Son to be the Mediator of his people whom he chooses to give to him, and the Son, who willingly subjects himself to the Father's will, and the Spirit, who promises to furnish the Son with the power and gifts to accomplish his mediatorial task. In this "pact of salvation" between the three Persons, we witness, according to Bavinck, the *"relationships and life of the three persons in the Divine Being as a covenantal life, a life of consummate self-consciousness and freedom. Here, within the Divine Being, the covenant flourishes to the full"* (*RD*3:214).

Whereas in the doctrine of the decrees of God, the unity of the Trinity is particularly emphasized, the doctrine of the "covenant of redemption" emphasizes the diversity of the respective works of the three Persons of the Trinity. The work of salvation, which is accomplished through the historical administration of the covenant of grace, is a work in which each of the three Persons of the Trinity performs, in accordance with the covenant between them, a distinctive task. In the same way that the work of creation involved the respective and unified operations of the three Persons of the Trinity, so in the work of re-creation each Person fulfills a particular role upon the basis of the eternal covenant of redemption. Thus, we should not regard the historical administration of the covenant of grace as a kind of "emergency" or *ad hoc* remedy for the redemption of the elect, but

rather as the realization in time of what the three Persons of the Trinity eternally resolved to accomplish.

*The pact of salvation ... further forms the link between the eternal work of God toward salvation and what he does to that end in time. The covenant of grace revealed in time does not hang in the air but rests on an eternal, unchanging foundation. It is firmly grounded in the counsel and covenant of the triune God and is the application and execution of it that infallibly follows. (RD 3:215)*

As this statement of Bavinck's understanding of the covenant of redemption indicates, we should not think of this covenant and the covenant of grace as though they were *two* covenants.<sup>2</sup> Rather, we should regard the covenant of grace as the covenant of redemption coming to fruition in the course of the history of redemption. It is no accident of history that God the Father should send his Son in the fullness of time to fulfill the promises of the covenant of grace made prior to his incarnation. Nor is it an accident of history that the Son should choose to assume human flesh and undertake his work as Mediator. Nor is it an accident of history that the Spirit should furnish Christ with the gifts required to the fulfillment of his office as Mediator, or apply the benefits of Christ's mediation to the elect. All of the respective operations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the accomplishment of God's saving purpose stem from what was eternally covenanted between the Persons of the Trinity in the *pactum salutis*. Because the covenant of grace is founded upon this intra-Trinitarian compact, it can be understood in its unity and diversity. Furthermore, as an expression of the eternal covenant of redemption, we can also affirm the inviolability and effectiveness of the covenant as the God-appointed instrument of redemption. The redemption that the covenant of grace effects for the covenant people of God, is a redemption that is of, from, and through God. Just as there is one God and Father of all who truly belong to the people of God, so there is one Son and Mediator, as well as one Spirit. Communion with the triune God, which is the goal to which the covenant of grace is ordained, is possible only upon the basis of the work of all three Persons in perfect unity and triune diversity (RD 3:215-6).

### **The relation between the pre-fall covenant and the covenant of grace**

Following his discussion of the covenant of redemption, Bavinck briefly argues that the historical administration of the covenant of grace should not be viewed too narrowly, as though it terminated solely upon the salvation of the elect.

In the Scriptural representation of the covenant of grace, the first use of the term "covenant" occurs in connection with the "covenant of nature" that God established in the context of the worldwide flood in the days of the patriarch, Noah. The breadth of the promise that God makes in conjunction with the event of the great flood is a reminder, in Bavinck's judgment, that God's purposes of redemption are as wide as creation in their scope. The whole of the cosmos and all of the nations directly benefit from God's purpose to redeem his people. The creation is preserved, the nations are enabled to prosper and develop, human culture advances, and the human sciences are advanced — all within the framework of God's overarching purpose of re-creation. With the redemption of his people in Christ, which is the principal goal of the covenant of grace in history, God also works to renew and enlist the fruits of humanity's fulfillment of the cultural mandate in the accomplishment of his great purposes of redemption. In Bavinck's own words, "(n)ature and grace, creation and re-creation, must be related to each other in the way Scripture relates them ... Common grace and special grace still flow in a single channel" (RD 3:216). God's purpose of redemption, accordingly, is a purpose to redeem a new humanity, and that purpose does not exclude, but includes, the re-creation of the cosmos. Re-creation, including the redemption of a covenant people, does not repudiate nature, but perfects it.

Of special importance to Bavinck's insistence that the covenant of grace is founded upon an eternal covenant of redemption and that it perfects rather than abandons God's work in creation, is his handling of the question of the relation between the pre-fall covenant of works and the post-fall covenant of grace. We should not view the covenant of grace as though it were at odds with, or in some fashion contradicts, the so-called covenant of works. The covenant of grace, rather, "was



*from the moment of its revelation and is still today surrounded and sustained on all sides by the covenant of nature God established with all creatures. Although special grace is essentially distinct from common grace, it is intimately bound up with it" (RD 3:225).* In order to appreciate the relation between these covenants, we need to have a clear understanding of the differences and similarities between them.

The essential difference between the pre-fall and post-fall covenants is evident in that the latter is purely and only an expression of God's grace. All the blessings of the covenant of grace are to be understood in the strictest sense as *"undeserved and **forfeited** blessings"* (RD 3:225, emphasis mine). Though the covenant of works was indeed an expression of God's grace and favor toward humanity, which conferred covenant rights that man as creature did not deserve, it was nonetheless a covenant that required perfect obedience to the law of God as the way to blessing and eternal life. In the covenant of works, man is treated as a responsible creature who is able to do what the law of God requires and thereby obtain the blessings of the covenant. The forfeiture of the blessings of this covenant occurs as the result of Adam's sin and disobedience. Indeed, in Adam the entire human race stands under the abiding obligation of perfect obedience and the sanction of condemnation and death on the basis of his failure to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law. *"God stands by the rule that those who keep the law will receive eternal life. He posits this in his law, attests it in everyone's conscience, and validates the statement in Christ. But human beings broke the covenant of works; now they are no longer able to acquire life by keeping it. By the works of the law no human being can be justified"* (RD 3:225).

Contrary to the "legalistic" character of this pre-fall covenant, we must understand the post-fall covenant to be purely "evangelical." Everything that was forfeited under the terms of the pre-fall covenant is obtained and guaranteed in the post-fall covenant by the provisions of God's grace in Christ.

In distinction from and contrast to the covenant of works, God therefore established another, a better, covenant, not a legalistic but an evangelical covenant. But he made it, not with one who was solely a human but with the man Christ Jesus, who was his own only begotten, much-beloved Son. And in him, who shares the divine nature and attributes, this covenant has an unwaveringly firm foundation. It can no longer be broken: it is an everlasting covenant. It rests not in any work of humans but solely in the good pleasure of God, in the work of the Mediator, in the Holy Spirit, who remains forever. It is not dependent on any human condition; it does not confer any benefit based on merit; it does not wait for any law keeping on the part of humans. It is in, through, and of grace.

God himself is the sole and eternal being, the faithful and true being, in whom it rests and who establishes, maintains, executes, and completes it. The covenant of grace is the divine work par excellence — his work alone and his work totally. All boasting is excluded here for humans; all glory is due to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (RD 3:225-6)

The essential difference between the pre- and post-fall covenants, therefore, is that in the covenant of grace every blessing that is bestowed through Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, is an undeserved and assured blessing that answers to what was lost and forfeited (de-merited) under the covenant of works (RD 3:225). There is an important difference between a covenant that is based upon grace *in the sense of unmerited favor* and a covenant that is based and rendered effective by grace *in the sense of favor shown to undeserving sinners who have forfeited every covenantal claim upon that favor.*

According to Bavinck, this difference between the covenants before and after the fall does not mitigate the fact that in both the law of God is fully upheld. Because God is unchangeably holy and righteous, the demand of his holy law is maintained, not only before the fall under the covenant of works, but after the fall in the administration of the covenant of grace. No human being can find favor with God without doing what the law of God requires; this is as true in the covenant of grace as it was in the covenant of works. Therefore, in the covenant of grace, God does not act capriciously or arbitrarily. He always acts in a way that maintains and upholds the righteous requirements of his holy law. Indeed, after the fall into sin, the whole human race comes to stand "under the law" in two respects: first, all remain obligated to do what the law requires in order to be

pleasing to God; and second, all now come under the law in terms of its liability and penalty. After the fall into sin, the requirement of perfect obedience in order to obtain eternal life remains, but it has now been complicated by the additional requirement that payment be made for the debts or demerits that disobedient sinners now owe God for their sins. *"After the fall, therefore, God lays a double claim on humans: that of the payment of a penalty for the evil done and that of perfect obedience to his law (satisfaction and obedience)" (RD 3:226).*

Because the covenant of grace fulfills and meets the abiding obligations of obedience that were first stipulated in the covenant of works, it restores God's people to favor with God and secures their inheritance of eternal life in communion with him. Christ, as the Mediator of the covenant of grace, is the "anti-type" of Adam in the covenant of works. Adam, the original covenant head of the human race, is "exchanged for and replaced by Christ," who is the covenant head of the new humanity (RD 3:226-7). Only within the history of Reformed theology has this correspondence and relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace come to full development. In the historical development of Reformed theology, it was soon recognized that Christ's work as Mediator of the covenant of grace obtained that righteousness and life for his people that was no longer able to be obtained through the covenant of works. Moreover, it was also emphasized that the covenant of grace, so far as Christ's work is concerned, was for Christ a covenant of works. Christ's entire obedience and sacrifice constitute the basis for restoring his people to favor and fellowship with God in a way that fully accords with the demands of God's righteousness. According to Bavinck, the "double claim" of God's law was fulfilled by the "passive" and "active" obedience of Christ, who not only suffered the penalty of the law but obeyed its precepts on behalf of his people.

In the further exposition of the doctrine of the covenant, Reformed theology also argued that the work of Christ in the covenant of grace was itself the fulfillment of the eternal "counsel of peace" (*pactum salutis*) in which Christ was appointed and willingly assumed the office of Mediator. Some in the tradition of Reformed theology went so far as to identify the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, and argued that, in the strictest sense, these two were essentially identical. By virtue of the foundation of the covenant of grace in the covenant of redemption, we may conclude that the covenant of grace is properly a covenant between God and Christ and *"in him with all his own"* (RD 3:227).

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

Indeed, there is a difference between the pact of salvation and the covenant of grace. In the former, Christ is the guarantor and head; in the latter, he is the mediator. The first remains restricted to Christ and demands from him that he bear the punishment and fulfill the law in the place of the elect; the second is extended to and through Christ to humans and demands from them the faith and repentance that Christ has not, and could not, accomplish in their place. The first concerns the acquisition of salvation, is eternal, and knows no history; the second deals with the application of salvation, begins in time, and passes through several dispensations. (RD 3:227)

## **Summary**

We will have occasion to consider the implications of this important comment in subsequent articles, when we take up directly Bavinck's conception of the relation between election and covenant. However, it is clear that this comment is of direct significance for this topic. In Bavinck's understanding, the covenant of redemption, which expresses the purpose of the triune God to save the elect and to do so by means of the different operations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, expresses the divine counsel or plan for the salvation of the elect. In the covenant of redemption, the "parties" are the triune God and all the elect in Christ; the non-elect are not party to or directly contemplated in the covenant of redemption. In the covenant of redemption, Christ fulfills as

guarantor all the "conditions" and demands that must be met in order to accomplish the salvation of the elect. However, in the covenant of grace, which represents the historical execution in time of God's counsel of redemption, the situation is more complicated. Though Christ is the Mediator of the covenant of grace and secures all of its blessings for his own people, the parties of this covenant are the triune God and his covenant people (believers and their children, as well as all whom the Lord calls to himself) who are obliged in the covenant to respond to God's grace in the way of faith and obedience (RD 3:227-228).

Lest this distinction between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace be misunderstood, Bavinck adds that there remains a fundamental unity and connection between them. Just as Adam was the covenant representative and head of the human race before the fall, Christ is the covenant representative and head of the new humanity after the fall. Unlike the first covenant, which could not secure the covenant inheritance of eternal life, the second covenant, because it is based upon the sure and perfect work of Christ as the covenant head and representative of his people, guarantees and infallibly secures what it promises. *"The covenant (of grace) is certain as a testament; it is a covenant of testaments and a covenantal testament. It involves no principle and is relatively immaterial whether one highlights the duality or the unity of the pact of salvation and the covenant of grace, provided it is clear that in the pact of salvation Christ can never even for a second be conceived apart from his own, and that in the covenant of grace believers can never even for one second be regarded outside Christ"* (RD 3:228).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bavinck rejects the idea of "merit" in the relationship between the creature and the Creator, particularly the traditional Roman Catholic distinction between two kinds of merit, "condign" and "congruent" (*meritum de condigno*, *meritum de congruo*). In Roman Catholic teaching, "condign" merit is true or full merit and is based upon the good work of the Holy Spirit in the individual believer; "congruent" merit is a half-merit or human work that does not truly merit God's grace, but receives its reward on the basis of God's generosity. See Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), pp. 190-2. Bavinck does not deny, however, that, whether we use the term "merit" in this context or not, the creature does have a right to the promised inheritance by virtue of the conferral of this right through the divinely initiated covenant relationship. Though Bavinck shies away from using the terminology of "merit" in the pre-fall covenant relationship, his position is consistent with earlier writers of the Reformed tradition who spoke qualifiedly of a kind of "covenant merit" (*meritum ex pacto*). Bavinck does not hesitate to employ the language of "merit," however, to describe the obedience of Christ as the last Adam, who fulfills all of the obligations of the law on behalf of his people and thereby justly procures their covenant inheritance. For a summary of the traditional Reformed view that Bavinck affirms, see Francis Turretin, *Elencitic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992), 1:569-86, esp. 2:712-24. Turretin allows that we may speak broadly and improperly of "merit" in the relationship between Adam and God, if we mean only to say that, by virtue of the covenant relationship, Adam's obedience would justly secure his inheritance of eternal life.

<sup>2</sup> The close link between the "covenant of redemption" and the "covenant of grace" is also underscored in Bavinck's *Saved by Grace*, p. 77 (108): "The covenant was established already in eternity with Christ as the Surety of His own. It did not come into existence for the first time within history. The covenant is rooted in eternity. Rather, the covenant existed at that point also in truth and in reality between the Father and the Son, and therefore immediately after the Fall the covenant could be made known to man and be established with man. Therefore, that covenant of grace, existing from eternity to eternity, functions within history as the instrumentality of all the redemption, the route along which God communicates all of His gracious benefits to man."

<sup>3</sup> Due to the unity and distinction between the eternal "covenant of redemption" and the historical execution of this covenant in terms of the "covenant of grace," Bavinck vacillates in his use of the language of Christ as the "head and representative" of his people. In the "covenant of redemption," Christ is certainly the "head and representative" of the elect. The situation is more complicated in respect to the covenant of grace, however, since this covenant in its historical manifestation may be viewed in two ways: either in terms of its substance and reality (in which case, it is a covenant that obtains between the triune Redeemer and all the elect who truly belong to Christ by faith) or in terms of its administration (in which case, it is a covenant that obtains between the triune Redeemer and all believers together with their children, not all of whom are elect).