

# Dr. Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant of Grace

## *The Covenant and the "Unio Mystica"*

### *The Second Key: The Covenant*

In the last article, we examined Bavinck's notion of the "organic" and how it played such an integral role in the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* and his occasional writings. We now turn our attention to Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant. As a Reformed theologian, the biblical doctrine of the covenant was dear to Bavinck's heart. He had been raised in a Reformed tradition that had deep roots in the love for and exposition of this doctrine.

The biblical notion of the covenant was a central doctrine in Bavinck's theology. Given his emphasis on the relationship between the objective and subjective in the structure of his theology, Bavinck conceived of the covenant as warm and intimate as opposed to impersonal and sterile.

It is also clear that Bavinck included the notion of the *unio mystica* as a vital aspect of the believer's participation in the covenant of grace.

### *The Reformed Tradition*

The doctrine of the covenant has always been a key and central component of Reformed theology. In 1534, Heinrich Bullinger published a work entitled *A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God* in Zürich. For Bullinger and the remainder of the Reformed tradition, the covenant relationship between God and his people was one of the central subjects of all of Scripture and the history of redemption. Bullinger summed up his thoughts on the importance of the covenant this way:

The entire sum of piety consists in these very brief main points of the covenant. Indeed, it is evident that nothing else was handed down to the saints of all ages, throughout the entire Scripture, other than what is included in these main points of the covenant, although each point is set forth more profusely and more clearly in the succession of times. For whatever things have been said in the Holy Scripture about the unity, power, majesty, goodness, and glory of God are included in this one expression of the covenant: “I am the all-sufficient Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

These words capture the essence of Bavinck’s relationship to this Reformed tradition. In fact, there is a close similarity and dependence on Bullinger and the tradition in which he stands when Bavinck writes, “This new humanity exists and lives solely by the grace of God, which now takes the particular form of a covenant.”<sup>2</sup> This quotation is also taken from one of Bavinck’s “earlier” works, and in fact was a speech he gave in Kampen, Holland in 1894 dealing with the subject of Common Grace (*Algemene Genade*).

*What did Bavinck teach in the “Gereformeerde Dogmatiek?”*

There is no different teaching when we investigate the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. There, we find the same concentration on the doctrine of the covenant. “All salvation and blessing flow to fallen man by grace which is a virtue of God. This grace, with all its benefits has appeared, objectively, in Christ, who obtained them and distributes them in the way of the covenant.”<sup>3</sup>

The covenant is one of the key means through which God’s special blessings flow to man. “Bavinck asserted that the main content of divine revelation was to be sought first

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<sup>1</sup> Bullinger, *FF*, 112.

<sup>2</sup> *AG*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> *GD4*:442. Comp. 3:206 & *RW*, 92ff. Bremmer, *HBDC*, 110. Hoekema writes, “As to the importance of the doctrine, attention has already been called to the fact that the Reformed confession and the Reformed Theology cannot be understood on any one single point apart from the doctrine of the covenant.”

of all not in the unity of God or in the law of God, but in the promise of God, in the Gospel—in other words, in the covenant of grace.”<sup>4</sup>

Bavinck’s doctrine of the covenant of grace is too extensive for us to give it justice in this work. We will, however, take the time to examine six components that are germane to the subject of this dissertation. These are the components: First, there are the *elements* of the covenant of grace. Second, there are the *characteristics* of this covenant. Third, there is the *dual aspect* of the covenant. Fourth, there is the relationship between the covenant of grace and the *ordo salutis*. Fifth, there is the other relationship between the covenant of grace and the *sacraments* in general. Finally, there is the relationship between the covenant of grace and the Lord’s Supper.

#### *Who can stand in God’s Judgment?*

It goes without saying that Bavinck’s doctrine of the covenant of grace is indispensable to his theology. Behind his concept of the covenant of grace is this important and key question: Who can stand in God’s judgment?<sup>5</sup>

Sinners engage in self-deception. They do this, “with the hope that there is no God (Ps. 14:1), that He does not bother about the sins of men, so that whoever does evil is good in His sight (Mal. 2:17), that He does not remember evil nor see it (Ps. 10:11 and 94:7), or else that, as perfect Love, He may not seek out and punish the wrong (Ps. 10:14).”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bremmer, *HBDC*, 111.

<sup>5</sup> *ORF*, 260.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

It is Scripture that points us in a different direction. It discloses God as a God of *love*, but also as a God of *justice*.<sup>7</sup> Bavinck goes on to explain that “the whole history of the world gives an irrefutable testimony to this justice of God.<sup>8</sup> God’s justice places man before a twofold dilemma: In the first place, “God has a quarrel with His creature.”<sup>9</sup> In the second place, “man does not agree with God.”<sup>10</sup> Each goes his way and each has his own idea and will about things.<sup>11</sup>

This leads Bavinck to conclude, “the history of the world is a judgment, a history full of judgments, full of struggle and war, of blood and tears, calamities and afflictions.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, this requires Bavinck to focus on redemption as both the need and desire of all mankind.<sup>13</sup>

Mankind asks the question: What shall I do to be saved? Unfortunately, man looks in all the wrong places for salvation, because he is at enmity with God because of sin. The need for redemption is “continually aroused in the hearts of people and kept alive there by God Himself.”<sup>14</sup>

This quotation is used by Bavinck to initiate a discussion of the notion of religion and the things of which it consists. He lists three characteristics.

First, “every religion brings with it a doctrine, a world and life view, a dogma.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., “God is love, indeed, but this glorious confession comes into its own only when love in the Divine being is understood as being a holy love in perfect harmony with justice. *There is room for the grace of God only if the justice of God is first fully established.*” Italics—RG.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 261. Bavinck substantiates his position by an appeal to Isaiah 55:8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Second, “no single religion is satisfied with a merely rational apprehension of these ideas, but urges men, by means of those ideas and with their assistance, to penetrate through to the supernatural world of God and spirits and to become united with them.”<sup>16</sup> That is, religion is never just a matter of dogma and doctrine alone. It is a conglomerate of feelings, attitudes of the heart, and enjoyment of the Divine favor. These are key concepts that will be used by Bavinck to explicate his view of the Christian religion, in particular.

Third, there is “the effort in some way or other to obtain this favor and fellowship and to assure its continuance in the future.”<sup>17</sup>

To this point, Bavinck has been speaking in general categories, as is often his approach to any given subject. Now, however, he moves from the general to the specific and declares that without “special revelation the religion of man and the philosophy of thinkers do not have a right knowledge of God, and, hence, no right knowledge of man and the world, and of sin and redemption.”<sup>18</sup>

Bavinck consistently takes his starting point in special revelation. There, “it is always God who seeks man, who discloses man to himself in his guilt and impurity, but who also makes Himself known as He is in his grace and compassion.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 265.

All other religions are auto-soteric.<sup>20</sup> Bavinck points out the unique saving truth of the Christian faith. “In the whole work of redemption it is God and God alone who manifests Himself as the seeking and calling One, and as the speaking and acting One.”<sup>21</sup>

#### *The Covenant and God’s Eternal Counsel*

Special revelation manifests the truth that the whole of God’s redemptive work depends upon an eternal counsel.<sup>22</sup> This counsel is both eternal and immutable and “lies at the basis of the whole work of redemption, of re-creation.”<sup>23</sup> This counsel includes God’s mind and will. It is unbreakable and will stand forever. It is synonymous with God’s *good pleasure and purpose*.<sup>24</sup>

The counsel of God contains three key matters as its content. “The first is election, by which is meant that gracious purpose of God according to which He ordained those whom He had before known in love to be conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).”<sup>25</sup> The persons elected are not the ground or basis of God’s election. There is but one basis and that is the grace of God. That is why Scripture refers to faith as a gift (Eph. 2:8).

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. “In the other religions it is man whom we always see at work, trying by the achievement of knowledge, by keeping all kinds of rules, or by withdrawal from the world into the secrecy of his own inner life, to obtain redemption from evil and communion with God. In the Christian religion the work of men is nothing, and it is God Himself who acts, intervenes in history, opens the way of redemption in Christ and by the power of His grace brings man into that redemption and causes him to walk in it. Special revelation is the answer which God Himself gives in word and deed to the questions which through His own guidance arise in the human heart.”

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Isa. 46:10; Eph. 1:5, 11; Luke 7:30; Acts 20:27; Isa. 14:27; 26:10; Heb. 6:17; Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21; Luke 2:14; Eph. 1:9; Rom. 9:11; Eph. 3:11; Rom. 8:28.

<sup>25</sup> *ORF*, 266.

Second, “there is contained in the counsel of redemption the achievement of that whole salvation which God wants to grant to His elect.”<sup>26</sup> Here the focus is more on the Mediator of the elect than on the elect themselves. The Mediator is the “organic” head of his people. “For the purpose of that election is not to pick up a few people at random, to bring them to salvation, and to let them stand loosely alongside of each other as single individuals. In His election God aims at nothing less than placing Christ the Mediator at the Head of His church, and to conform the church to the body of Christ.”<sup>27</sup>

At this juncture, two important aspects of Bavinck’s theology concerning God’s eternal counsel should be noted: First, there is his disdain for individualism. He is convinced that the covenant community must be seen as a *community*. This means that ethics and behavior, in the foremost place, is community oriented.

The second aspect has two facets. Christ as Mediator is the Head of his church, and the church is to be conformed to his body. This is related to the first aspect, which focuses our thoughts on the centrality of community living in the covenant of grace.

The final point in Bavinck’s understanding of the eternal counsel of God is that “the working out and the application of the salvation wrought by Christ is also included in the counsel of God.”<sup>28</sup> Here the emphasis is on the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit and his application of Christ’s work. “The plan of redemption is established through the Father in the Son but it is established also in the fellowship of the Spirit.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Redemption (re-creation and restoration) takes place only through the applicatory activity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>30</sup> This is the trinitarian kernel that is found throughout Bavinck's theological thinking and methodology. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit accomplish redemption<sup>31</sup>

God's counsel has various facets that must not be overlooked. It "not only determines the *results*, but it also governs the *means*. It includes not merely the *consequences*, but also the *causes*."<sup>32</sup> Because it includes these aspects there is no suggestion that it annihilates the "rational and moral nature of man, but creates it, rather, and guarantees it, and always to the same extent as history causes us to know it."<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, this counsel of God is displayed in Scripture as the sole work of God. Man cannot earn or merit redemption. It is God's work in and on man to bring him to salvation. Therefore, "the counsel of God teaches us that the work of redemption is from beginning to end the work of God, that it is most uniquely the divine work. Redemption, quite as much as creation and providence, is solely the work of God."<sup>34</sup>

An important and practical question is this: When did this counsel of redemption begin? Bavinck answers, "as soon as man had fallen."<sup>35</sup> The promise given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15 is "nothing less than the announcement and institution of the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. "It is the Spirit who is earned, promised, and sent by Christ (John 16:7 and Acts 2:4, 17), who testifies of Christ and receives everything from Christ (John 15:26 and 16:13,14), and who now works regeneration in the church (John 3:3), faith (1 Cor. 12:3), the adoption (Rom. 8:15), the renewing (Titus 3:5), and the sealing unto the day of redemption (Eph. 1:13 and 4:30). And all this the Holy Spirit can work out and bring into being because, together with the Father and the Son, He is the one true God who lives and reigns eternally."

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 269. Italics—RG.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 270.

covenant of grace.”<sup>36</sup> Man enters into league with Satan through the fall and God, by an almighty act of his gracious will, brings man back to his side. He does this by placing enmity between the seed of Satan and the seed of the woman.

This “*Protevangelium*” is gracious for several reasons. “There is nothing conditional and uncertain about this. God Himself comes to man, He Himself plants the enmity, He initiates the warfare, and He promises the victory. Man has no part in this except to listen to it and to accept it in childlike faith. Promise and faith are the content of the covenant of grace.”<sup>37</sup> In this manner the Father discloses the way “home” to his fallen creature; the way that gives access to eternal salvation.

Bavinck emphasizes that the counsel of redemption and the covenant of grace are inextricably bound together. “The counsel of redemption, fixed in eternity, and the covenant of grace with which man is acquainted immediately after the fall, and which is then set up, stand in the closest relationship with each other. They are so closely related that the one stands or falls with the other.”<sup>38</sup>

#### *God’s Council, His Covenant, and Election*

Bavinck gives an interesting assessment of the relationships among the counsel of God, the covenant of grace, and election. The biblical notion of election is not something to be eschewed, but a divine act that delineates the graciousness of grace. If the covenant of grace is separated from election, what one is left with is a covenant of works.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

“Election implies that God grants man freely and out of grace the salvation which man has forfeited and which he can never again achieve in his own strength.”<sup>40</sup>

What Bavinck wants his reader to do is to think along with him. If fallen man can somehow—by his conduct—earn or merit salvation, then man has landed squarely in a covenant of *works*.<sup>41</sup> God’s election is not the whole counsel of redemption, but is certainly the “first and principal part of it.”<sup>42</sup>

Election is a trinitarian work that has a view to the accomplishment and application or appropriation of what God has purposed. Moreover, “the counsel of redemption is itself a covenant—a covenant in which each of the three Persons, so to speak, receives His own work and achieves His own task.”<sup>43</sup> This is a very crucial concept for Bavinck and refers not only to God’s *opera ad extra*, but also to the “economic” Trinity.<sup>44</sup>

#### *The God Who acts in History has One Covenant*

What Bavinck does is to guard the working of God in history. To that end, he will not allow any attempt at loosing history from its moorings in eternity in the gracious, almighty will of God. Precisely because this relationship exists between the counsel and history, the covenant of grace is the “actualization” of the eternal counsel in history. It is within the context of history that one can truly speak of a “development of the covenant of grace.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Italics—RG. Bavinck writes (*ORF*, 272), “But if this salvation is not the sheer gift of grace but in some way depends upon the conduct of men, then the covenant of grace is converted into a covenant of works. Man must then satisfy some condition in order to inherit eternal life. In this, grace and works stand at opposite poles from each other and are mutually exclusive. If salvation is by grace it is no longer by works, or otherwise grace is no longer grace. And if it is by works, it is not by grace, or otherwise works are not works (Rom. 11:6).”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. “As in the counsel of God, so in history each of the Persons appears. The Father is the source, the Son is the Achiever, and the Holy Spirit is the one who applies our salvation.”

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 274.

In its historical development, the covenant of grace manifests three remarkable characteristics.

“In the first place, the covenant of grace is everywhere and at all times one in essence, but always manifests itself in new forms and goes through differing dispensations.”<sup>46</sup> That is, the covenant of grace is essentially and materially one. It has gone through various epochs, economies, or dispensations.<sup>47</sup> Whether it is before, under, or after the Law, it remains a covenant of grace. “It is called this because it issues from the grace of God, has grace as its content, and has its final purpose in the glorification of God’s grace.”<sup>48</sup>

This covenant is typified by an all-inclusive promise: I will be your God and you will be my people. From the *Protevangelium* in Genesis 3:15 to the apostolic words in 2 Corinthians 13:13 the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit focuses on the redemption of lost sinners. It is exactly within the context of the covenant of grace that God reveals himself as the Immutable and Faithful One.<sup>49</sup>

More specifically, in Christ the covenant receives its fulfillment and takes on a universal character, no longer being limited just to the nation and people of Israel.

The second characteristic of the historical development of the covenant of grace “is that in all of its dispensations it has an organic character.”<sup>50</sup> It is here that Bavinck re-introduces the biblical notion of election. For it is special revelation that tells us that

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 275-276. “Irrespective, however, of the forms in which the covenant of grace manifests itself, it always has the same essential content. It is always the same Gospel (Rom. 1:2 and Gal. 3:8), the same Christ (John 14:6 and Acts 4:12), the same faith (Acts 15:11 and Rom. 4:11), and always confers the same benefits of forgiveness and eternal life (Acts 10:43 and Rom. 4:3). The light by which the believers travel differs, but their route is always the same.”

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 276.

election took place in Christ (Eph. 1:4; 3:11) and, therefore, “went into operation in such a way that Christ could appear as Head of His church, and the church could form the body of Christ.”<sup>51</sup> This means, among other things, that the elect of God do not stand in a more or less loose relationship with each other, but are one in Christ. There is an intimate union between Christ and his believers.

Bavinck views this union as *organic*. What does he mean by this? It has already been demonstrated above how Bavinck conceived of the notion of the organic. This concept is woven throughout the entire fabric of his theology. The question that needs to be asked now is this one: How does Bavinck integrate the idea of the organic into his understanding of the covenant of grace? Essentially, he gives two answers. The first focuses on what Christ has done for man and the second concentrates on the relationship: God—Man—Nature.

In the first place, Bavinck speaks of the practical application of the active and passive obedience of Christ.

Christ. . .takes upon Himself the fulfillment not only of what the first man has done amiss but also of what he should have done and did not do; He satisfies for us the demands made by the moral law; and He now gathers together into one unit His whole church in the form of a renewed humanity under Himself as Head. In the dispensation of the fullness of times, God gathers everything in one again in Christ—all things in heaven and on earth (Eph. 1:10).<sup>52</sup>

Bavinck speaks of the church gathering work of the Lord being carried on in an organic fashion. It is precisely this notion of organic that rules out individualism in the covenant of grace. Bavinck ties in God—Man—Nature in the following manner:

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 277.

Hence we observe that in history the covenant is never concluded with one discrete individual, but always with a man and His family or generation, with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and with the church and its seed. The promise never concerns a single believer alone, but in him his house or family also. God does not actualize His covenant of grace by picking a few people out of humanity at random, and by gathering these together into some sort of assemblage alongside the world. Rather, He bears His covenant into mankind, makes it part and parcel of the world, and sees to it that in the world it is preserved from evil. As the Redeemer or Re-Creator, God follows the line that He drew as Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of all things. Grace is something other and higher than nature, but it nevertheless joins up with nature, does not destroy it but restores it rather. Grace is not a legacy that is transferred by natural birth, but it does flow on in the riverbed which has been dug out in the natural relationships of the human race. The covenant of grace does not ramble about at random, but perpetuates itself, historically and organically, in families, generations, nations.<sup>53</sup>

This is one of the cardinal theses in Bavinck's theology: *grace does not destroy nature, but restores it*. The great advantage in this for him—other than it is biblically true—is that Bavinck is not stuck in a dualism between nature and grace as, for example, Roman Catholicism is.

“A third and final characteristic of the covenant of grace goes paired with the second, namely, that it realizes itself in a way which fully honors man's rational and moral nature.”<sup>54</sup> Bavinck is anticipating a criticism that he knows will be leveled at his view of the sovereignty of God in the eternal counsel and the covenant of grace. The criticism goes something like this: If God is sovereign in the way Bavinck has described him, then man cannot be man, because he is relegated to the position of a puppet, robot, or automaton. Bavinck disagrees with this objection.

The covenant of grace is based on the counsel of God “and nothing may be subtracted from that fact.”<sup>55</sup> Rather than being seen as something negative, God's sovereignty ought to be exalted. For, “behind the covenant of grace lies the sovereign and omnipotent will

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

of God, which is penetrated by Divine energy, and which therefore guarantees the triumph of the Kingdom of God over the whole power of sin.”<sup>56</sup>

It is necessary to point out that God’s omnipotent will is “not a necessity which imposes itself upon man from outside, but is, rather, the will of the Creator of heaven and earth, One who cannot repudiate His own work in creation and providence, and who cannot treat the human being He has created as though it were a stock or a stone.”<sup>57</sup>

God’s will is that of a merciful and kind Father, who never forces things with brute violence, but successfully counters all our resistance by the spiritual might of love.<sup>58</sup> God speaks to us as morally responsible people through our reason and our will.<sup>59</sup> This approach preserves both the sovereignty of God and the moral responsibility of man, without falling into Pelagianism or Semi-Pelagianism.

### *Is Everyone in the Covenant of Grace saved?*

Before closing this chapter a word needs to be directed to two final matters. The first is the question: Is everyone who is in the covenant of grace saved? The second matter has to do with the age-old question: Does Bavinck teach the difference between an “internal” and “external” covenant in his theology? Obviously, the second is related to the first. We shall investigate them in turn.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 277-278.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 278. The Canons of Dort, III/IV:12, tell us that when God truly brings a sinner into the covenant of grace and makes him or her alive together with Christ, that this is a divine work “which God works in us without us.” “It is, however, clearly a supernatural, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, marvelous, mysterious, and inexpressible work.” God does not treat his creature as a stock or block(head), but works in this fashion: “Therefore the will so renewed is not only acted upon and moved by God but, acted upon by God, the will itself also acts. hence also man himself is rightly said to believe and repent through the grace he has received.” For those who are still not convinced, the Canons go on to say this in III/IV:16. “Man through his fall did not cease to be man, endowed with intellect and will; and sin, which has pervaded the whole human race, did not deprive man of his human nature, but brought upon him depravity and spiritual death.” Now here is an important key as the divines gathered in Dordrecht continue. “So also this divine grace of regeneration does not act upon men as stocks and blocks and does not take away the will and its properties, or violently coerce it, but makes the will spiritually alive, heals it, *pleasantly* and at the same time *powerfully* bends it.” Italics—RG.

Bavinck's answer to the first question is that "there can also be persons who are taken up into the covenant of grace as it manifests itself to our eyes and who nevertheless on account of their unbelieving and unrepentant heart are devoid of all the spiritual benefits of the covenant."<sup>60</sup> The Bible is clear that not all Israel is Israel (Rom. 9:6) and that the children of the flesh are not counted as the seed, but the children of the promise (Rom. 2:29; 9:8). The Bible is equally clear that there are people who display a *form* of godliness, but who deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5).<sup>61</sup>

Based on the conflict between essence and appearance, between those who are *de facto* members of the covenant of grace through faith and the "tares," some have tried to posit "a distinction and a separation between an internal covenant, which was made exclusively with the true believers, and an external covenant, comprehending the external confessors."<sup>62</sup> Bavinck is convinced that such a separation and difference cannot stand in light of what Scripture teaches.<sup>63</sup> What, if anything, does he offer in the place of the notion of internal and external? Simply this: "It can be said that there are two sides to the one covenant of grace. One of these is visible to us; the other also perfectly visible to God, and to Him alone."<sup>64</sup>

This position is entirely consistent with Bavinck's view of the Church of Jesus Christ as well. What does this mean concretely? It means that we cannot judge the heart and must reserve a judgment of charity with a view to those who are in the covenant of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 278-279.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

grace.<sup>65</sup> Human judgment can best begin at home through the biblical process of self-examination, to ensure we are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5).<sup>66</sup>

### *The Covenant of Grace and the Lord's Supper*

When this aspect of Bavinck's theology is examined, it is observed that what was previously discussed, concerning the relationship between the Old and New Testaments with regard to Passover and the Lord's Supper, is integrally linked to the covenant of grace.

“The New Testament ascribes to the Passover a typical significance. It is not only a commemoration of the deliverance from Egypt, but also a sign and pledge of redemption from the bondage of sin and of fellowship with God in the promised Messiah.”<sup>67</sup> The blood of Christ which was poured out for many is a “sign, is sacrificial blood, blood of atonement. . .that is, it was covenantal blood (*bondsbloed*).”<sup>68</sup> It is precisely this “blood of the covenant” motif (to. ai-ma, mou th/j diaqh,khj) that Christ uses in the institution of the Lord's Supper.<sup>69</sup>

This motif carries with it the bond of fellowship between God and his people. This is a key idea for Bavinck and one that will recur in both his soteriology and sacramentology. Therefore, when Christ instituted the Lord's Supper in conjunction with the Old Testament Passover, he connected the Supper with the covenant.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. “We have to keep to the rule that we cannot judge of the heart, but only of the external conduct, and even of that defectively. Those who, as the human eye sees them, are walking in the way of the covenant must according to the judgment of love be regarded and treated as our fellows in grace. But in the final analysis it is not our judgment, but God's, that determines. He is the Knower of hearts and the Trier of the reins. With Him there is no respecting of persons. Man looks on the outward appearance but God looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7).”

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>67</sup> GD4:518, “Het Nieuwe Testament kent ann dit pascha eene typische beteekenis toe, zoodat het niet alleen eene herinnering is aan de bevrijding uit Egypte, maar ook een teeken en onderpand van de verlossing uit het diensthuis der zonde en van de gemeenschap met God in den beloofden Messias.”

<sup>68</sup> GD4:523.

<sup>69</sup> Comp. Ex. 24:8; Zech. 9:11; Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 9:20; 10:29; 12:24; 13:20.

When Christ speaks to his disciples and distributes the elements, “he not only gives in the signs of bread and wine an explanation of his death, but he also distributes those signs for the nourishment of his disciples.”<sup>70</sup>

By connecting the Old Testament Passover and the doctrine of the covenant, Christ teaches his disciples that the fellowship with God prefigured in the Old Testament finds a much richer expression in Himself, the reality. Through Christ, the true and complete sacrifice has been accomplished. On the basis of that sacrifice, fellowship with God in the Lord’s Supper is much richer and fuller than was possible under the administration of the Older Covenant.<sup>71</sup>

The Lord’s Supper is a meal, the actual meal of God and his people; a sacrificial meal; the sacrificial meal *par excellence*, in which believers enjoy Christ himself, as he died for them. This is what Jesus is expressing when he gives the bread and wine as signs of his broken body and shed blood.<sup>72</sup> He gives himself not only *for* his own, but also *to* his own.<sup>73</sup>

Having concluded this brief introduction to Bavinck’s notion of the covenant of grace, we turn to the next concept that goes hand-in-hand with this doctrine: Justification by faith.

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<sup>70</sup> Bremmer, *HBDC*, 220-221.

<sup>71</sup> *GD4*:523-524.

<sup>72</sup> *GD4*:524.

<sup>73</sup> Bremmer, *HBDC*, 221.