

ABRAHAM KUYPER, HERMAN BAVINCK, AND “THE CONCLUSIONS OF UTRECHT 1905”¹

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Introduction

HERMAN BAVINCK (1854–1921) is often contrasted with his great contemporary and senior, Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). We may briefly observe, as has been noted by others, that whereas Kuyper was a man of broad vision and sparkling ideas, Bavinck was a man of sober disposition and clear concepts. Whereas Kuyper was more speculative, tracing out intuitively grasped thoughts, Bavinck was a more careful scholar and built on and from historical givens. While Kuyper is notable for his efforts to bring reform to the church and society, applying the principles of Calvinism to the social and political concerns of his time, even helping to orchestrate the first Christian political party in the Netherlands (the Antirevolutionary Party), Bavinck’s strengths resided in examining some of the inadequacies of old answers and so demonstrating the need to press forward with new proposals. Finally, while Kuyper was mainly deductive, Bavinck was mainly inductive.² Without question, Kuyper was the more controversial of the two men, for Kuyper excelled at polemics and directed most of his theological work to a more popular audience. Bavinck, on the other hand, sought to gain a hearing for classic Reformed theology within the modern academic context, though he did write his share of popular works aimed at pastors and the laity.

This last difference between them is in part illustrated in that most of Kuyper’s theological writings first appeared as semi-popular articles in *De Heraut* [The Herald], later published in book form—e.g., *Dat de Genade Particulier Is* (1884),³ *De Leer der Verbonden* (1885) [The Doctrine

¹ This article is a modification (at points abridged, at other points much expanded) of my “Introductory Essay” to Herman Bavinck’s book *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* [Calling and Regeneration], translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman, and published under the English title, *Saved by Grace: The Work of the Holy Spirit in Calling and Regeneration* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008).

² See T. Hoekstra, *Gereformeerde theologisch tijdschrift* 22 (1921): 101; also see Rolf Hendrik Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, Academisch Proefschrift, Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1961), 13–64; Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1968), 130–133; Louis Praamsma, *The Church in the Twentieth Century: Elect from Every Nation*, vol. 7., trans. the author (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1981), 25–28.

³ In English, *Particular Grace: A Defense of God’s Sovereignty in Salvation*, trans. Marvin Kamps (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2001).

of the Covenants], *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 3 vols. (1888–89),⁴ *E Voto Dradraceno*, 4 vols. (1892–95) [From the Voice of Dort], *Gemeene Gratie*, 3 vols. (1902–05) [Common Grace], *Onze Eeredienst* (1911) [Our Worship], etc. Certainly a major exception to this observation is Kuyper's massive, three volume *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (1893–94),⁵ which represents his most scholarly and academic theological work.

In reference to Bavinck's writing, his chief work was his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* in four volumes, first published in 1895–1901, with a second and expanded edition issued in 1906–11.⁶ Bavinck also subsequently penned two abbreviated dogmatic works. The first, *Magnalia Dei: Onderwijzing in de Christelijke Religie naar Gereformeerde Belijdenis* [The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to Reformed Confession] (1909), was a one volume, compressed dogmatics (659 pages), and was translated into English in 1956, and is still in print under the title: *Our Reasonable Faith*;⁷ the second work, *Handleiding bij het Onderwijs in den Christelijken Godsdienst* [Manual for Instruction in the Christian Religion] (1913), is a short compendium of the previously mentioned work, consisting of some 251 pages. Some of Bavinck's popular works include: *De Offerande des Lofs* (1901)⁸; *De Zekerheid des Geloofs* (1901)⁹; *Het Christelijk Huisgezin* [The Christian Home] (1908); and *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* [Calling and Regeneration] (1903).

The difference that exists between Kuyper and Bavinck—though not a radical difference—can be seen in how each of them addressed the theological topics that gave rise to the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905. It is probably not startling to assert that Bavinck's views, rather than Kuyper's, received the greater endorsement at the Synod of Utrecht as reflected in its adjudication of the disputed topics. But what is perhaps not well understood is that Bavinck only mildly departs from Kuyper on the debated points, and his thinking serves to show how Kuyper's concerns could be accommodated without fully approving of them.

In order to demonstrate this, we will first present, by way of a brief historical survey, the background which led to the formation of *De Gereformeerde Kerken in Netherland* (GKN) and the controversy that ensued concerning some of Kuyper's theological emphases. Next we set forth an exposition of Kuyper's and Bavinck's views on the four disputed points addressed by the Synod at Utrecht 1905. From here, and finally, we will put forward a comparative analysis of their respective positions on the

⁴ In English, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries; with explanatory notes by Henri De Vries, with an introduction by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900).

⁵ A small section of volume one and the entirety of volume two were translated into English as *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik de Vries, with an introduction by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898).

⁶ The English publication of this work is now complete under the title *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008).

⁷ *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Henry Zylstra (1956; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977).

⁸ In English, *The Sacrifice of Praise: Meditations before and after receiving access to the Table of the Lord*, 2nd ed., trans. John Dolfen (Grand Rapids: Louis Kregel, 1922).

⁹ In English, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catherines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1980).

disputed points; in doing so we will present the text of “The Conclusions of Utrecht” in order to examine how the Synod adjudicated the doctrines in question. In that connection we will also offer some evaluative comments by way of an assessment of Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s handling of these issues. “The Conclusions,” we will argue, for the most part reflect the texture and traits of Bavinck’s theology and are, therefore, Bavinck-*esque* in their formulations.

1. Historical Background

In order to understand the controversy that escalated within the then recently formed *De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN) [The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands], which led to synodical adjudication at the Synod of Utrecht 1905, it is necessary to sketch briefly the history of each of the reformatory movements which came together in 1892 to form this new church body. These two distinct movements of reform within the Dutch State Reformed Church (*De Hervormde Kerk*), namely the *Afscheiding* of 1834 and the *Doleantie* of 1886, brought with them distinct histories and theological accents.¹⁰

1.1. *The Churches of the Secession*

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

¹⁰ See L. Knappert, *Geschiedenis der Hervormde Kerk onder De Republiek en Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff & Co., 1911–12), II, 37–41, 298–313, 342–46; D. H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition: from the Reformation to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 79–98; Henry Beets, *De Chr. Geref. Kerk in N. A.: zestig jaren van strijd en zegen* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Printing Company, 1918), 18–50, 327ff.; idem, *The Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1946), 24–37; James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 3–33; Hendrik Bouma, *Secession, Doleantie, and Union: 1834–1892*, trans. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1995); J. Veenhof, “Geschiedenis van theologie en spiritualiteit in de gereformeerde kerken,” in *100 Jaar Theologie: aspecten van een eeuw theologie in de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (1892–1992)*, ed. M. E. Brinkman (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1992), 9–27.

Among the principal leaders of this movement were Hendrik De Cock (1801–1842) and Anthony Brummelkamp (1811–1888).¹¹ Turbulent years were to follow for the Seceders, for they were persecuted from without by the state authorities and subject to disagreement and division from within by a series of doctrinal and practical disputes. In 1854 these churches reached a strong measure of concord; and that same year they founded a theological school at Kampen for the training of ministers. Herman Bavinck was appointed professor of Dogmatics at Kampen in 1882.

1.2. *The Churches of the Grieving*

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

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

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

The union of 1892 between the *Afscheiding* and the *Doleantie* was preceded by suspicion and difficulties. Some members of each group looked askance at the other, and some leaders in the *Afscheiding* distrusted Kuyper and disliked elements of his theology. Of particular concern in the union talks was the status of the theological school at Kampen and the theological faculty at the Free University of Amsterdam. Each school was allowed its place and its identity, and students could be trained for ministry at either school. The union was accomplished in

¹¹ Other leaders included Hendrik Peter Scholte, Simon Van Velzen, Albertus C. Van Raalte, and G. F. Gezelle.

1892 and adopted the name *De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN) [The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands]. This union, unfortunately, proved to be less than harmonious from the start. Immediately some ministers and congregations of the *Afscheiding* left the union, returning to the churches that had not joined the merger, namely the *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk* [The Christian Reformed Church]. Meanwhile, within a decade of the union, some particular theological views of Kuyper had created enough disagreement and ecclesiastical irritation as to move Bavinck to enter the fray by writing a series of some forty short articles published in the periodical *De Bazuin* [*The Trumpet*] from 29 March 1901 through 2 May 1902. These articles were later published as a book under the title, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* [Calling and Regeneration], and were written shortly after he had taken up the chair of dogmatics at the Free University of Amsterdam in 1901 (as Kuyper’s successor).

This book, in taking up the question of *immediate* or *unmediated* regeneration—one of the principal topics addressed at the Synod of Utrecht 1905—, was not needlessly or fruitlessly burdening the church with a technical topic of obscurantist theology; rather, the book sought to bring unity to the church—even if this meant that he had to disagree with his great contemporary, Kuyper. Indeed, Bavinck’s book may be characterized as a mildly “anti-Kuyperian” work—that is, Bavinck stands, if ever so gently, against Kuyper on this particular point and related matters. It should be observed that prior to the publication of this work, Bavinck had recently completed the first edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* in four volumes (1895–1901). The controversy, surrounding some features or accents of Kuyper’s theology on regeneration and baptism, escalated. For example, L. Lindeboom, Bavinck’s colleague at Kampen, asserted that Kuyper taught views not demanded by the Reformed confessions. It became clear that the matter would require synodical adjudication. In 1905 the Synod of Utrecht offered what might be termed “compromise” declarations or “pacifying” conclusions on four issues under discussion, though in each case Kuyper’s particular views, far from being vindicated, are mildly censured.¹²

The committee that took up this matter included members of each group, “A” churches and “B” churches (*Afscheiding* and *Doleantie* respectively).¹³ The presider of the committee was H. H. Kuyper, a fervent advocate of his father’s views. That Utrecht sought to maintain unity among

¹² An English translation of the Conclusions of Utrecht can be found in *Acts of Synod 1942 of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: n.p., [1942], Supplement XVII, pages 352-5).

¹³ This divided mindset of “A” churches and “B” churches continued to plague the GKN in its subsequent history, culminating in theological controversy that ended in the fracturing of those churches in 1944, with the deposition of Klaas Schilder and others. At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, “A” churches, in general, wanted to preserve the theological heritage of the Secession, though doctrinal disagreement on covenant and baptism marked that heritage, while “B” churches, reflecting Kuyper’s theological accents, emphasized the theological heritage of prominent strands of seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theology. The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905, sought to argue that both camps were within confessional boundaries and each “side” ought to guard against one-sidedness and allow the full revelation and accents of Scripture to be given their due. See E. Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop*, met een woord vooraf van Prof. Dr. K. Dijk (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1946), 279–319.

the churches is reflected in the committee's explanation of its work—two quotations in particular illuminate the mind-set of the committee, wherein they recommend that Synod not offer a definitive judgment on the disputed points. They explain that such was

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

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

If on the one hand men lay more emphasis on the sovereignty of God, on the eternity and immutability of God's decrees, on the omnipotent working of God's grace, and on the stability of the Covenant of Grace; while on the other hand men fix their attention more on the guilt of man, on the application of God's decrees in time, on the means which God uses in the work of grace, and on the personal appropriation of the blessings of the Covenant; both presentations find their ground in Scripture, they serve to complement each other in warding off all one-sidedness, and the elimination of one of these lists of propositions in the interests of the other would do damage to the knowledge of God, to the salvation of our souls, and to the practice of piety. Our Reformed Churches have therefore at all times and in all lands maintained *libertas profetandi* with respect to these differences. Thereby they have demonstrated how, in the defense of the Confession, a breadth of insight and approach serves to guard the churches against one-sidedness and to keep the way open to further developments in theology.¹⁴

¹⁴ Both quotations are taken from John Kromminga, *Christian Reformed Church History (Class notes)* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, n.d.), 29–30. The copy I am quoting from was issued in 1983.

2. Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s Views vis-à-vis the Four Issues in Dispute at Utrecht 1905

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

We discover that in their respective treatments of each of these doctrines, Bavinck mildly disputes or softens Kuyper’s presentation in order to set forth, what he judged to be, a more balanced portrait.

2.1. *Supralapsarianism versus Infralapsarianism*

2.1.1. Kuyper’s sober supralapsarianism

Regarding the debate between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism, Kuyper, while having sympathies to certain features of the infralapsarian position, embraced supralapsarianism. Indeed, certain features of his theological thinking appeared to be consequential of this stance. But before we explore that avenue, it is important not to caricature Kuyper. He embraces supralapsarianism with some reserve, for he offers his own criticisms against it, which are direct and pointed. A dangerous construct is easily put upon the supralapsarian scheme, Kuyper warns, so that sin is deduced from God’s decree and God is rendered culpable for human depravity. Supralapsarianism also evokes the idea that God creates a part of humankind for the express purpose of damning millions of souls to hell and destroying them eternally. Kuyper recoils from these conceptions and regards them as incompatible with God’s “love” and “inscrutable mercies.”¹⁵ Nonetheless, Kuyper believes that infralapsarianism is plagued with similar problems, for it relies on a kind of divine foreknowledge such that God knows what is in store for the humans he decrees to create, yet, God decrees to create them just the same.

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

Kuyper argues that we are quick to judge such a man as barbaric, inhumane, and monstrous. We would all say that the ship-owner (since

¹⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno: Toelichting op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1892–95), II, 170–171. Also see Kuyper’s “De Deo Operante” (Het Werken Gods) in *Dictaten Dogmatiek: College-Dictaat van een Studenten niet in den Handel*, met een woord vooraf van Dr. A. Kuyper, 5 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d.), I, 114ff.; “Locus De Ecclesia” in IV, 38–44.

he knows that the cargo would explode and cause such a destructive fire, even if the sailors are at fault) is responsible to prevent such a tragedy; he may not send the ship to sea with that cargo, or, at the very least, he must provide life-jackets to the entire crew.¹⁶

Infralapsarianism, then, Kuyper maintains, does not get us one step closer than supralapsarianism to solving the mystery surrounding the fall and God's decree. God knows with perfect certainty that if he creates man, he will fall—i.e., Adam and all his posterity; and God knows with perfect certainty whom he will save according to his good pleasure and inscrutable mercy. Thus, for Kuyper, we must leave unexplained what Scripture leaves unexplained, and the relation between God's eternal decree and the fall into sin, with its terrible repercussions, is impenetrable for us. This means that we cannot deduce the fall from God's decree, since that removes human guilt; nor can we deduce the decree from the fall, for then God's decree no longer exists and, in the end, we lose God as well.¹⁷ "All schemes that have tried to find a solution for this mystery end either with a weakening of man's consciousness of sin and guilt, or with a weakening of the sovereignty and self-sufficiency of God."¹⁸ Thus, given that dilemma, Kuyper takes up supralapsarianism as being simply more in line with the truth of Scripture, not as the solution to an impenetrable mystery. Scripture everywhere constrains us to recognize that the salvation of the elect is the fruit and result of God's eternal love, and that by virtue of election they are created, by virtue of election they are formed, and by virtue of election they shall be saved. The way of election—and this is what we must hold fast—precedes the fall and precedes the creation.¹⁹

2.1.2. Bavinck's appreciation for and critique of the supra/infra positions

Bavinck treats this topic at length in his *Reformed Dogmatics* under a chapter entitled "The Divine Counsel." He believes that this debate cannot be resolved by an appeal to Scripture. Both views are grounded finally on the sovereign good pleasure of God. The difference rests in this: the infralapsarian position seeks to follow a historical, causal order of the decrees, while the supralapsarian position follows the ideal, teleological order. Each view ends up needing aspects of the other, and neither view captures the whole truth of Scripture.²⁰ Thus, although the infralap-

¹⁶ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 171–72.

¹⁷ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 172.

¹⁸ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 172.

¹⁹ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 172. Also see Kuyper's *De Vleeschwording des Woords* (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1887), 202–24.

²⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), II, 384–92 [359–69]. Note: all citations to Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* in this essay are taken from the second edition of that work, printed after the Conclusions of Utrecht; however, it should be understood that the essential content of his discussion in the second edition remained unchanged from the first edition, the earlier edition being printed (1895–1901) prior the Synod of Utrecht 1905. See his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1895–1901). On Bavinck's understanding of the doctrine of predestination, see the article by Cornelis P. Venema, "Covenant and Election

sarian view seems less harsh and more modest, more gentle and fair, in fact it cannot account for reprobation as a matter of sin and unbelief; rather, infralapsarians must view reprobation, like election, as founded upon the inscrutable good pleasure of God. Moreover, in placing the decree of reprobation after the fall, infralapsarians face the difficulty of specifying the nature of the fallen sinners who are rejected—that is, Are they to be reckoned in Adam and infected with original sin only or are they to be viewed as persons who are also guilty because of all of their actual sins accumulating to them?²¹

Meanwhile, the supralapsarian view faces its own set of problems, chief of which is that it conceives of election and reprobation in abstract terms, and makes the objects of the same “non-beings”—that is, “not specific persons known to God by name.”²² Although this view does not try to justify God, and it forthrightly and immediately sets itself upon the good pleasure of God, it does so in a way that threatens to make election in Christ exactly parallel to reprobation for sin. That is,

it makes the eternal punishment of reprobates an object of the divine will in the same manner and in the same sense as the eternal salvation of the elect; and further, that it makes sin, which leads to eternal punishment, a means in the same manner and in the same sense as redemption in Christ is a means toward eternal salvation.²³

Bavinck commends supralapsarianism for holding to the unity of the divine decrees, so that all things serve and are coordinated for an ultimate goal; and he lauds infralapsarianism for differentiating the divine decrees with respect to their distinct objects, so that not only a teleological but also a causal order is discerned. But he also observes that neither view can really capture God’s perspective, since God views the whole scene of the created order and its history in a single intuition; indeed, all things are “eternally present to his consciousness.” This means that “His counsel is one single conception, one in which all the particular decrees are arranged in the same interconnected pattern in which, a posteriori, the facts of history in part appear to us to be arranged now and will one day appear to be fully arranged.”²⁴ In short, the interrelationship and diversity of connections is so “enormously rich and complex” that our ordering of the divine decrees cannot replicate it. Moreover, the idea of predestination does not encapsulate the counsel of God, for God’s counsel is much richer than the eternal destiny of his rational creatures. Bavinck proposes that “common grace” be given a much more central place in connection with the divine decrees and God’s counsel, for this involves the whole of cosmic history and enables us to understand that the creation is to be viewed “as a systematic whole in which things occur side by side in coordinate relations and cooperate in the furthering of what al-

in the Theology of Herman Bavinck,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 19 (2008): 71–78; 99–102.

²¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 385–86.

²² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 387.

²³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 387.

²⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 392.

ways was, is, and will be the deepest ground of all existence: the glorification of God.” Bavinck likens the scope and compass of the divine decree pertaining to the world as a “masterpiece of divine art,” in which every part, every detail, is organically interconnected and serves its purpose according to the eternal design of its sovereign author.²⁵

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

all the polemics conducted by the two parties over this issue have not helped the church to take a single step forward, for the simple reason that both parties started out from opposing positions. The one stood squarely on the level ground below; the other loftily looked at the issue from a mountain summit. No wonder the two failed to understand each other. For that reason as well, it is absurd to say that a theologian of our time would be called a ‘supralapsarian,’ or to take the opposite point of view as the self-styled ‘infralapsarian.’ This is simply inconceivable, if for no other reason than that in our time this profound issue has assumed a very different form.²⁶

Bavinck then refers to the decision taken by the Synod of the GKN at Utrecht in 1905 on this matter.²⁷

A little later in this same discussion Bavinck appeals to Kuyper again in order to bolster his argument against making predestination to refer too narrowly to the election and reprobation of humans and angels. Over against this narrow perspective, Bavinck maintains that predestination pertains to all of world history, and world history may not be discarded after the consummation; on the contrary, it continues to have fruits for eternity.²⁸ Kuyper lends support to this view and asserts that earlier Reformed theologians did not adequately accent God’s concern for all of creation, even as they neglected the use of common grace in constructing the doctrine of predestination itself.

If nothing else, whatever problems vexed theologians, pastors, and laypersons prior the synodical decisions of Utrecht 1905, Kuyper’s views ought not to be caricatured, and Bavinck, editing and revising his *Dog-*

²⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 392.

²⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 388–89, fn. 148. The quotation from Kuyper is taken from his *Gemeene Gratie*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1902–1904), II, 95–96. Note: these remarks, first printed in *De Heraut*, and then published with all the articles in the series in book form, predate the Synod of Utrecht 1905.

²⁷ See the appendix.

²⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 390, fn. 152. Bavinck references Kuyper’s *Gemeene Gratie*, II, 91–93.

matics after Utrecht (the second edition appearing from 1906–1911), actually appeals to Kuyper to demonstrate the inadequacies of both supra-lapsarianism and infralapsarianism, when each stand alone.

2.2. *Justification from Eternity*

2.2.1. Kuyper’s advocacy of eternal justification

Justification from eternity, simply stated, means that “the sinner’s justification need not wait until he is converted, nor until he has become conscious, nor even until he is born.”²⁹ Whereas sanctification depends upon our faith, has to do with “the quality of our being,” and cannot be “effected outside of us,” justification depends “only upon the decision of God, our Judge and Sovereign” and is “effected outside of us, irrespective of what we are....” Kuyper judges this point to be essential for rightly understanding justification, for the justification of the sinner is never on the basis of the sanctification of the sinner.³⁰ Thus, since justification does not depend upon any virtue or merit or good work in the sinner, and since God is free and sovereign in his engagements with his human creatures, God is therefore free to declare one justified at any moment he pleases. “Hence the Sacred Scripture reveals justification as an *eternal* act of God, *i.e.*, an act which is not limited by any moment in the human existence.”³¹ Kuyper even more strongly writes, “It should openly be confessed, and without any abbreviation, that justification does not occur when we become conscious of it, but that, on the contrary, our justification was decided from eternity in the holy judgment-seat of our God.”³² Justification, then, is not something that depends upon the believing sinner’s awareness or knowledge in order to take effect in him; rather, it takes place “at the moment that God in His holy judgment-seat declares him just.”³³ Kuyper hastens to add that “this publishing in the consciousness of the person himself *must necessarily follow*,” which is the Holy Spirit’s work; he reveals to God’s elect, in the way of faith, the divine verdict of justification regarding them, *i.e.*, he “causes them to appropriate it to themselves.”³⁴

Kuyper does not deny, but affirms, that Christ, as Son of God, prepares the way of salvation in his work of incarnation and resurrection, and so “brings about justification,” and God the Father acts as the judiciary who justifies the ungodly on that basis. Meanwhile, God the Holy Spirit unveils this justification to God’s chosen people. Thus, for Kuyper, Scripture teaches two positive truths, which on the surface appear to

²⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1927), 462; in English, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries; with explanatory notes by Henri De Vries, with an introduction by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900), 369. Both sources will be cited throughout this essay, first the original, followed by the pagination of the English translation in square brackets []. Quotations are from the English translation unless otherwise indicated.

³⁰ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 460 [367–68].

³¹ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 462 [369].

³² Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 462–63 [370].

³³ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 463 [370]; *idem*, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 337.

³⁴ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 464 [371].

contradict one another, namely (1) that God “has justified us in His own judgment-seat *from eternity*; and (2) that we are justified *by faith* “only in conversion.”³⁵

In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism Kuyper again addresses this topic, and again argues that the way of redemption, including justification, is grounded in the eternal counsel of God. The elect are *destined* to justification; and since God’s counsel is eternal the elect are justified, according to God’s counsel, from eternity. From eternity, in his eternal “telic-vision” (*eindaanschouwing*), they stand before him as righteous or justified.³⁶

Kuyper acknowledges that in a certain sense justification is not an entirely accomplished fact so long as it is not appropriated by the individual; and since this appropriation only comes by way of faith, it can be said that God first brings about the justification of persons when he awakens them to faith. Nonetheless, this imparting of faith and subsequent declaration and appropriation of justification does not change what has always been the case according to God’s eternal decision, namely, that justification is from eternity.³⁷ Thus, from God’s point of view, the believer is justified from eternity, according to God’s own sovereign and eternal counsel; from the point of view of the objective accomplishment of the basis for justification for all the elect, then justification is accomplished at Christ’s resurrection; and from the believer’s point of view, when justification begins to be worked in him or her personally, then justification is when God places his hand of preparatory grace upon that person. But if the question is when do believers come to *know* themselves as justified, then the answer is when they believe, that is, when faith is effectuated in them. Finally, if it is inquired when the justification of believers will become a reality and known before the universe, then the answer is at the last judgment.³⁸ Kuyper thus articulates five senses in which we may conceive of justification.³⁹ Eternal justification, then, is the first sense that grounds all the others, since it has to do with the justification of the sinner in God’s eternal decree.

2.2.2. Bavinck’s modulated appraisal of eternal justification

Bavinck states that it is certainly true that *in a sense* the sinner’s justification has already taken place in the counsel of election.⁴⁰ He observes that this is a “precious truth” that no Reformed person will deny. However, he also asserts that that truth does not mean it is advisable to speak of an eternal justification, for “Scripture nowhere models this usage.”⁴¹ To be sure, justification is decreed from eternity, but that same

³⁵ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 463–64 [370–71].

³⁶ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 333–34.

³⁷ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 338.

³⁸ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 340.

³⁹ For Kuyper’s further elaboration on each of these, see *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 340–46.

⁴⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Henry Zylstra (1956; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 459; idem, *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 591.

⁴¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 216.

sort of truth applies to everything that transpires in time; everything in the concrete history of this creation is decreed from eternity. There is nothing that escapes God’s eternal counsel.⁴²

Bavinck explains that the Reformed were compelled, in their opposition to neonomianism and antinomianism, to examine justification in a more conceptually penetrating way so as to avoid both of those errors. Thus they came to distinguish between an active and passive justification. The Reformed warded off neonomianism by arguing that faith is not a work that accomplishes forgiveness; and they fended off antinomianism in that they “almost unanimously rejected the doctrine of eternal justification.”⁴³ Bavinck elaborates on the latter point:

Thus they commonly assumed that, even if one could with some warrant speak of a justification in the divine decree, in the resurrection of Christ, and in the gospel, active justification first occurred only in the internal calling before and until faith, but the intimation of it in human consciousness (in other words, passive justification) came into being only through and from within faith.⁴⁴

To demonstrate the cold reception that the doctrine of eternal justification received by most Reformed writers, Bavinck first references the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 11, art. 4, which states that “God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.” Bavinck also cites various renowned seventeenth-century Reformed theologians who opposed the doctrine. But, interestingly, the Reformed writers who propagated the doctrine of an eternal justification, such as A. Comrie, J. J. Brahe, and Nicolaus Hotius, come from the eighteenth century, after the rise of pietism.⁴⁵ Antinomians were most prone to accept this doctrine and use it in their opposition to the neonomians. In any case, Bavinck refers to numerous Reformed writers who opposed this teaching, and to various Reformed confessions that make clear that justification is *by faith*, without conceiving of faith as a work that contributes to or cooperates with the verdict of justification.⁴⁶

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

⁴² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 216.

⁴³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 202–03; also see III, 583. 590–91.

⁴⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 203.

⁴⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 203, fn. 98.

⁴⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 203, fn. 99.

justification have “lost sight of the difference between the decree and its execution, between the ‘immanent’ and the ‘objectivizing’ act.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, even when it is considered in the decree, the satisfaction of Christ for his own is undoubtedly logically anterior to the forgiveness of their sins and the imputation of the right to eternal life. After all, those who reversed this order would in fact make Christ’s satisfaction superfluous and go down the road of antinomianism.... Even those among Reformed theologians who accepted a kind of eternal justification never claimed that the exchange between Christ and his church in the pact of redemption [i.e., the *pactum salutis*] already constituted full justification. But they considered it its first component and expressly stated that this justification had to be repeated, continued, and completed in the resurrection of Christ, in the gospel, in the calling, in the testimony of the Holy Spirit by faith and from its works, and finally in the last judgment. Accordingly, not one of them treated or completed [the doctrine of] justification in the locus of the counsel of God or the covenant of redemption, but they all brought it up in the order of salvation, sometimes as active justification before and as passive justification after faith, or also completely after faith.⁴⁸

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

It is of the greatest importance, nevertheless, to hold onto the Reformed idea that all the benefits of the covenant of grace are firmly established in eternity. It is God’s electing love, more specifically, it is the Father’s good pleasure, out of which all these benefits flow to the church.⁴⁹

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

2.3. *Immediate (or Unmediated) Regeneration*

2.3.1. Kuyper as champion of immediate regeneration

Turning now to the question of immediate regeneration, and its relationship to divine calling, Kuyper carefully staked out and vigorously argued for this view.

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

⁴⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 590–91.

⁴⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 591.

⁴⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 591. Cf. Bavinck’s comments in his book *Our Reasonable Faith*, 459.

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

In expositing his doctrine of immediate or unmediated regeneration, Kuyper is careful to set forth a number of distinctions in an effort to clarify his view and protect it from misunderstanding. First Kuyper differentiates regeneration defined in the narrower sense and regeneration defined in the wider sense. The former refers to God’s exclusive act of quickening, whereby God “translates us from death into life, from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son.” This is regeneration understood as “*a starting-point*.” Here God “plants the principle of a new spiritual life” in the soul, and one is born again. The latter refers to “the *entire* change by grace effected in our persons, ending in our dying to sin in death and our being born for heaven.”⁵⁰ This is how the term was used in early Reformed theology and the Reformed confessions, as in the Belgic Confession, art. 24.⁵¹ Kuyper maintains that both uses of the term are legitimate, but he will be using the word, unless otherwise noted, in its narrower or more limited sense.

Kuyper next makes the broad distinction between first and second grace. *First grace* refers to “God’s work in the *sinner*” without the sinner’s knowledge or volition—the sinner is absolutely passive—, while *second grace* denotes “the work wrought in *regenerate* man with his full knowledge and consent.”⁵² This *first grace*, then, has to do with “the *first implanting of life*.” Kuyper unfolds this idea:

[It is] evident that God did not begin by leading the sinner to repentance, for repentance must be preceded by conviction of sin; nor by bringing him under the hearing of the Word, for this requires an opened ear. Hence the first *conscious* and comparatively cooperative act of man is always *preceded* by the original act of God, planting in him the first principle of a new life, under which act man is wholly *passive* and *unconscious*.⁵³

This, in short form, is what Kuyper means by *immediate* or *unmediated* regeneration, for the work of regeneration *in this sense* is directly infused into the soul of the fallen sinner by the Holy Spirit without any use of means.⁵⁴

Kuyper distinguishes eight successive stages in God’s gracious work in the life of the sinner: (1) the implanting of the new life-principle ; (2) the keeping of the implanted principle of life; (3) the call by the Word and Spirit, internal and external; (4) the call of God producing the conviction of sin and justification, two acts of the same exercise of faith; (5) the exercise of faith resulting in conversion (here the child of God become

⁵⁰ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 378–79 [293]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 407–09.

⁵¹ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 378–79 [293]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 402–03; and also, III, 410–11, where Kuyper shows how the Canons of Dort sometimes use the word in the more limited sense.

⁵² Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 382, 429 [295, 339].

⁵³ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 381 [294]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 409.

⁵⁴ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 412.

clearly conscious of the implanted life); (6) conversion merging itself with sanctification; (7) sanctification finished and closed in complete redemption at the time of death; and (8) glorification in the last day, when the inward bliss is manifest in outward glory, and the soul is reunited with its glorified body, and the enjoyment of the state of perfect happiness.⁵⁵

For Kuyper, the salvation of deceased covenant infants is of principal concern.⁵⁶ The practical and theological concern is that covenant infants are the objects of God's salvific activity, which means that infant salvation must needs look different than the salvation of adults. In the case of infants God saves them by implanting a new life-principle in them. Kuyper borrows the language of older Reformed writers who called this the *faith-faculty* (*fides potentialis*), which is followed by the *faith-exercise* (*fides actualis*), and the *faith-power* (*fides habitualis*). The *faith-faculty* means that salvation does not begin with faith itself or the act of repentance; rather, God first plants life where none exists, giving "power to the powerless, hearing to the deaf, and life to the dead."⁵⁷

Kuyper argues that this new principle of life (which is regeneration), can remain "dormant" (like being asleep) for quite some time before the Holy Spirit makes it sprout into manifest and conscious life. Until this happens, however, the Holy Spirit preserves it—"like seed-grain in the ground in winter; like the spark glowing under the ashes, but not kindling the wood; like a subterranean stream coming at last to the surface."⁵⁸ Indeed, this sprouting forth to manifest life is the work of the Spirit in the divine call of the gospel through the Word. This is where "means"—as in *means* of grace—come into play. The sprouting-to-life takes place in the person in whom the Holy Spirit, without the use of means, has already wrought the seed of life and the *faith-faculty* (*fides potentialis*), but now the Spirit uses means, namely the Word of God, to produce faith in their hearts, i.e., faith as *the exercise of faith* (*fides actualis*). "Hence the preaching of the Word and the inward working of the Holy Spirit are divine, correspondent operations." Concretely stated: "Under the preaching of the Word the Spirit energizes the *faith-faculty*, and thus the call becomes effectual, for the sleeper arises."⁵⁹

When a capacity for faith, as persons who have the new principle of life implanted in them, gives way to an exercise of faith (or what we would call actual faith), repentance and justification are the result of this inward and effectual divine call of the gospel. We could also say that *the acts of faith*⁶⁰ are the result, and then this exercise of faith, actually believing and trusting in the Lord, results in conversion, i.e., the children of

⁵⁵ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 382–85 [295–297]. Cf. idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 446–52, where Kuyper treats conversion and sanctification.

⁵⁶ This pastoral concern drives his discussion in *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 5–12; also see his *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 382, 386, 396, 409 [295, 298, 308, 320].

⁵⁷ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 382 [295]; cf. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, rev. edition, ed. Ernst Bizer., trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 540–42.

⁵⁸ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 383, 403 [295, 313].

⁵⁹ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 383 [296].

⁶⁰ On the "acts of faith," see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 22.

God actually become conscious that they are reborn and have new life in Christ. Thus “the implanting of the new life *precedes* the first act of faith, but conversion *follows* it.”⁶¹

Of course, in speaking of regeneration Kuyper, like any Reformed theologian, views the unregenerate person as not only “deaf and blind,” not only as a “stock or block,” but worse, for “neither stock nor block is corrupt or ruined, but an unregenerate person is wholly dead and a prey to the most fearful dissolution.”⁶² A fallen human being may be likened to a corpse: though he seems intact and whole, he is altogether corrupt and befouled with death. The unregenerate are “utterly unprofitable.” This is why “every operation of saving grace must be preceded by a quickening of the sinner, by an opening of blind eyes, an unstopping of deaf ears—in short, by the implanting of the faculty of faith [*fides potentialis*].”⁶³

Having made this point, Kuyper is concerned to show how the “act of regeneration” in this narrow, technical definition plays out differently with respect to covenant infants than in the case of adult converts. With respect to adults, there is little disagreement regarding how this comes to manifestation, for all agree that regeneration is not an act of moral suasion; fallen persons are neither workers nor coworkers in regeneration; rather, in bringing adults to faith and repentance, God acts *irresistibly* in their hearts, bringing them to new life, etc., making the unwilling willing; and this coincides with conversion. In the case of infants, however, regeneration and conversion do not coincide; nonetheless God makes little children the objects of his saving operations without this coincidence.⁶⁴

Against the Ethical theologians⁶⁵ who advocated a doctrine of baptismal regeneration, or at least a kind of sacramental regeneration, which relieved the sinners of “inability” and afforded them “the opportunity to choose for or against God,” Kuyper argues that regeneration is not tied to the baptismal rite—that is, baptism does not regenerate infants or any other recipient of the sacrament. Baptismal regeneration, then, is emphatically and explicitly denied by Kuyper. As for regeneration itself, Kuyper is careful to state that it is not a tack-on or an additional compo-

⁶¹ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 384 [296]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 415. Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 65, and in that connection 68, 124, 445–46.

⁶² Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 392 [304].

⁶³ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 393 [305]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 415.

⁶⁴ See Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 393–98 [305–309]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 414, 416–18.

⁶⁵ The Ethical theology, represented by such men as N. Beets (1814–1903), J. H. Gunning (1829–1905), D. Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–1874), and J. J. van Toorenenbergen (1821–1903), was the Dutch version of the German “Vermittlungstheologie” (mediating theology) and argued for a strong experiential form of Christianity in opposition to the intellectualism of rationalism, and for a heavy accent upon moral life in distinction from dogmatic theology. Moreover, ethical theology, though having sympathies to orthodox confessional theology, embraced a critical approach to Scripture, and was strongly influenced by Schleiermacher and modern German philosophy. Essentially, the “ethical” school sought to mediate between traditional orthodoxy and rationalist critiques of Christianity by focusing upon pious experience and ethical concerns. By disposition and conviction, the Ethicals promoted social responsibility and an irenic approach to theological and ecclesiastical controversy. However, they strongly opposed Abraham Kuyper’s ecclesiastical reforms in the Dutch (State) Reformed Church in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

ment of man, as if a regenerate person is part old man and part new man. On the contrary, says Kuyper, the regenerate person is “one man—viz., the old man *before* regeneration, and the new man *after* it—who is created after God in perfect righteousness and holiness.” The regenerate person is in principle changed and has a new nature; his ego or self is renewed, though he must still battle an old nature. As a new creature he is redeemed; he is not two things.⁶⁶

This elicits the question “whether this regenerating act *precedes*, *accompanies*, or *follows* the hearing of the Word.” Kuyper believes that his answer to this question constitutes “the solution” to what some view as a controversy. “The Holy Spirit may perform this work in the sinner’s heart *before*, *during*, or *after* the preaching of the Word.”⁶⁷ Kuyper’s elaboration on this statement is not to be missed:

The inward call may be associated with the outward call, or it may follow it. But that which precedes the inward call, viz., the opening of the *deaf ear*, so that it may be heard, is not dependent upon the preaching of the Word; and therefore may *precede* the preaching. Correct discrimination in this respect is of the greatest importance.⁶⁸

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

- 1st. Regeneration in its *first stage*, when the Lord plants the new life in the dead heart.
- 2d. Regeneration in its *second stage*, when the new-born man comes to conversion.
- 3d. Regeneration in its *third stage*, when conversion merges into sanctification.⁶⁹

In the first stage, which is quickening, God works *without means*. In the second stage, which is conversion, God *employs means*, namely the preaching of the Word. In the third stage, which is sanctification, God “uses means in addition to ourselves, whom He uses as means.”⁷⁰ Kuyper is more than willing to speak of regeneration, as Scripture sometimes does and as the confessions sometimes do, in the most comprehensive sense of the restoration and renewal of corrupt man, involving the full scope of God’s redemptive work.⁷¹ And speaking of regeneration in this comprehensive sense then allows the distinctions between quickening, conversion, and sanctification.

It is interesting to note that Kuyper does not think that all the fine distinctions he has employed in order to come to clarity on this topic ought to be dragged into the pulpit. Only conversion and sanctification ought to be the focus in preaching, since the preaching of the Word is

⁶⁶ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 401–03 [312–13]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 405, 421.

⁶⁷ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 407 [317].

⁶⁸ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 407 [317–18].

⁶⁹ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 407 [318].

⁷⁰ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 407–08 [318–19].

⁷¹ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 408 [319].

“the appointed means to effect them.” But the work of theology can rightly have a broader aim than preaching—an aim that includes the refutation of error. Kuyper was facing opponents in the form of the Ethicals, the Rationalists, and the Supernaturalists.⁷²

In any case, to speak of regeneration as *quicken*ing is especially important concerning the salvation of little children, who cannot manifest the marks of conversion and sanctification. Without regeneration as *quicken*ing we face a “real danger” of branding covenant children as unsaved, concluding that “our deceased infants must be lost, for they can not hear the Word.”⁷³

For Kuyper, then, quickening and conversion must be kept distinct, for conversion or the inward call is preceded by quickening, wherein the sinner receives hearing ears; and now being able to hear the Word, the Holy Spirit uses the Word as a means of grace. The passivity that characterized the sinner in quickening passes over into activity and a certain degree of cooperation on the sinner’s part. This latter aspect is what Kuyper calls “second grace.”⁷⁴

The elect but unregenerate sinner can do nothing, and the work that is to be wrought in him must be wrought by another. This is the first grace. But after this is accomplished he is no longer passive, for something was brought into him which in the second work of grace will cooperate with God.⁷⁵

Kuyper thus takes up the divine work of calling—a term that he is using in the narrow or limited sense of the call to repentance, i.e., the sinner being called out of darkness into light. This call issues forth primarily and officially from the preaching of the Word—though the Holy Spirit remains the real agent in this work, and both the preacher and the sermon are his instruments. That said, God is free to convey his Word in other ways as well. For Kuyper, the work of calling is the Holy Spirit’s work, and it “proceeds in and though the preaching of the Word, and calls upon the *regenerated* sinner to arise from death, and to let Christ give him light.”⁷⁶ As Kuyper speaks of it here, as the inward call, he is not talking about the outward call addressed to the unregenerate person, for the unregenerate do not have ears to hear.

In considering the operation of the inward call, Kuyper’s primary focus is upon already baptized persons—i.e., persons baptized as infants, whose regeneration is assumed and who need to come to conversion. Moreover, this inward or effectual call is addressed to the elect, whereas the ordinary or outward call addresses the non-elect. The inward call is God’s call and requires God’s action, even where quickening has pre-

⁷² Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 408–09 [319].

⁷³ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 409 [320].

⁷⁴ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 428–29 [339].

⁷⁵ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 429 [339].

⁷⁶ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 432–34 [340–42]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 432–33.

ceded it, for the regenerate—or quickened sinners—will not come of themselves.⁷⁷

Kuyper views inward calling as a twofold work: (1) the first work is God coming with the Word, and the Holy Spirit performs an inward operation, making the seed of faith sprout to life in the work of preaching and hearing the Word; and (2) the second work follows wherein the preached Word effectively enters the very center of the sinner’s heart and life, bringing with it an illumination of the understanding, such that he comes under the conviction of his sin, and conversion takes full effect.⁷⁸ Thus the Holy Spirit operates upon the converted person’s will, in the words of the Canons of Dort: God powerfully enlightens the minds of his chosen ones “by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God” and “he also penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised,” besides infusing “new qualities into the will, making the dead will alive, the evil one good, the unwilling one willing ...” (Canons of Dort, III-IV, art. 11). God does not treat us as blocks and stones or ignore our will and understanding; rather, he “spiritually revives, heals, reforms, and ... bends it back” (Canons of Dort, III-IV, art. 16). None of this “rules out or cancels the use of the gospel ...” (Canons of Dort, III-IV, art. 17). Hence our wills yield to God, and love enters our souls.

The difference between regeneration and calling comes to this: “*re-generation* takes place independently of the *will* and *understanding*; that it is wrought in us without our aid or cooperation; while in *calling*, the will and understanding begin to act, so that we *hear* with both the outward and inward ear, and with the inclined will are *willing* to go out to the light.”⁷⁹

2.3.2. Bavinck as critic and proponent of immediate regeneration

Bavinck’s perspective on this question is aptly set forth in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, in a chapter entitled “Calling and Regeneration.” In ways similar to Kuyper, Bavinck maintains that Scripture allows us to speak of regeneration in three distinct ways:

(1) as the principle of the new life planted by the Spirit of God in humans before they believe, (2) as the moral renewal of humans manifesting itself in a holy walk of life, and finally (3) as the restoration of the whole world to its original completeness. Thus rebirth encompasses the entire scope of re-creation from its very first beginning in the heart of people to its ultimate completion in the new heaven and new earth.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 428–31.

⁷⁸ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 431–33 [345–47]. Kuyper elaborates upon and explains the meaning of the sinner’s cooperation in conversion in the chapter that follows this discussion, 434–40 [349–53]; also idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 424–26, 438.

⁷⁹ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 434 [348]. Cf. idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 426–28.

⁸⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 53.

For Bavinck, the first, restricted use of regeneration is not to be identified with external calling. External calling, which being distinguished as “a real call” (*vocatio realis*) refers to God’s call “through nature, history, environment, various leadings, and experiences,” and has as its medium the law as expressed in “the family, society, and state, in religion and morality, in heart and conscience,” obliges all humans to live according to God’s goodness and truth.⁸¹ This call, however, is insufficient for salvation since it is absent Christ and the gospel. But when external calling is distinguished as “the verbal call” (*vocatio verbalis*), a call that comes to humans in the form of the revealed law and especially in the form of the revealed gospel, this is calling that summons persons to faith in Christ and to dependency upon God’s grace.⁸² This is a universal offer of grace that is “seriously and sincerely meant” inasmuch as the gospel is preached to persons “not as elect or reprobate but as sinners, all of whom need redemption.” The universal offer, however, is “not to all people individually.” For Christ’s atonement is not a mere offer that has a universal scope; rather, it is effectual and secures “full, real, and total salvation,” according to the will and purpose of God. Therefore the call of gospel-preaching reaches its goal in the salvation of the elect, but the external call also reaches its goal for those who reject it. Moreover, this external call, though not a preparatory grace in an Arminian sense, is a “preparatory grace” if understood in the right way. God is the God of nature and grace, of creation and re-creation, and he uses both “the real call” and “the verbal call” to prepare his elect for redemption, though the implantation of spiritual life in regeneration remains God’s own immediate “creative work.”⁸³

It is clear that not all persons to whom God addresses his operations in the external call respond in faith. The reason for this diverse response, Bavinck argues, may not be grounded in the human will, nor may it be founded upon some sort of doctrine of “congruism” or a merely morally suasive operation of divine grace. Instead, the diverse response is rooted in “the nature of the calling itself”—that is, for the Reformed, it is rooted in the difference between external and internal calling or other such nomenclature.⁸⁴

Bavinck’s argues for the biblical propriety of this distinction under five points. (1) All humans share the same spiritual and moral incapacity of original sin, and none are worthy of God’s kindness or saving operations. “Hence the difference that occurs among people after the calling is inexplicable in terms of human capacities.” Divine grace alone accounts for this difference. (2) The proclaimed Word of the gospel is insufficient in itself to change the fallen human heart. Without the secret operation of

⁸¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 33–34; 76–77; also see Bavinck’s comments in *Our Reasonable Faith*, 407–09, where he identifies this sort of call with common grace and argues that by means of this proclamation of the law God curbs sin, represses human passions, and restrains the flow of iniquities. “A human society and a civic righteousness [are] made possible by it, and these in turn open up the way for a higher civilization, a richer culture, and a flowering of arts and sciences.”

⁸² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 34–35.

⁸³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 36–39; idem, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 415–17.

⁸⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 41–42; idem, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 413–15.

the Holy Spirit to effect regeneration in us, none would come to faith and salvation. (3) This means that the salvation is a divine work from first to last, “both subjectively and objectively.” “The calling is the implementation of divine election,” for God alone draws people unto himself. He makes us to will and to do according to his good pleasure. (4) This is why the Scripture calls this “rebirth,” and this is also why some notion of “moral suasion” does not capture the biblical portrait of God giving a person a new heart. (5) Last, “Scripture itself speaks of calling in a dual sense.” The Bible can speak of calling that is inefficacious and calling that is always efficacious as the realization of election.⁸⁵

In addition, Bavinck pointedly asserts that the difference between the general call through creation and history and the special call through the preaching of the gospel differ not merely in degree “but in essence and kind.”⁸⁶

In contrast to the Anabaptists who made regeneration reliant upon “an active faith and repentance,” and the Lutherans who took Titus 3:5 as supporting a doctrine of baptismal regeneration—but an “amissible” or losable regeneration—the Reformed carved out their own path. Rather than undervalue the church’s ministry and the means of grace, as the Anabaptists did, or overvalue the church and the means of grace, as the Lutherans did, the Reformed initially spoke of regeneration by faith.⁸⁷ That language of course was ambiguous, and inasmuch as small children and infants were incapable of such faith, the question arose whether they should be thought of as candidates for baptism and, even more, for salvation itself.⁸⁸ The Reformed, notes Bavinck, came to various answers in attempting to provide an affirmative answer to that query.

They grounded the baptism of the children of the church in the faith of the parents or of the church, in the faith children would exercise in the future, or in a largely undefined covenant of grace in which children were included with their parents.⁸⁹

Then, too, others appealed to those scriptural texts which indicate that the Holy Spirit is able to begin his sanctifying operations in the womb.⁹⁰ Coupled with this view,

Others based it on the reality, assumed to exist by faith in the promise of the covenant of grace, that the Holy Spirit had wrought in their hearts [i.e., in the hearts of covenant children] an established disposition of faith and hence of rebirth (in the narrow sense, as the very first life principle).⁹¹

⁸⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 43–44. The reader is urged to consult these pages for Bavinck’s citation of Scripture, etc., also see pages 46–53 for more of his presentation of the scriptural materials on regeneration.

⁸⁶ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 411.

⁸⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 55–56.

⁸⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 56.

⁸⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 56.

⁹⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 56.

⁹¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 56.

Here Bavinck is speaking of Kuyper’s stated position. But as Bavinck observes, “In the works of [Reformed] theologians, Calvin among them, several of these lines of argument occur side by side, and not one of them is made dominant.”⁹²

Bavinck proceeds to examine the doctrine of assumed regeneration, a topic that we will consider below. At this point we observe, however, that Bavinck acknowledges that this doctrine rightly reckons with the fact that faith and repentance have to be understood in light of radical human depravity, and that the blessings of faith and repentance are produced by “a secret internal operation of the Holy Spirit.” Regeneration, therefore, has to precede faith and repentance. But the weakness of this doctrine is manifest in light of divine election and practical experience, for not all covenant children who have been baptized, upon reaching maturity, reveal themselves to be regenerate. Therefore a restriction was forced upon this view in terms of divine election, such that “only elect children” may be said to be “as a rule regenerated before their baptism.”⁹³

Like Kuyper and many Reformed theologians before him, Bavinck affirms immediate regeneration in this first and formative sense, and so he affirms the distinction between “faith as capacity” and “faith as act.” He likewise therefore affirms the distinction between “conversion in a passive and an active sense—in other words, between regeneration and repentance (faith), and in the order of redemption ... the former precede[s] the latter.”⁹⁴

Indeed, the Reformed were forced to clarify and refine their position on the Holy Spirit’s operations in regeneration given that all forms of Pelagianism locate regeneration *after* faith and repentance. All Augustinians, on the other hand, place regeneration *before* faith and repentance. This is a fundamental theological divide wherein human decision is finally determinative for the former view and divine decision is finally determinative for the latter view. Moreover, if original sin is true and if the children of believers are to be regarded as candidates for salvation, and if, being children not yet of the age of discretion (so that they are incapable of faith and repentance by means of the ministry of the Word), then regeneration must run ahead of faith and repentance. In short, faith as capacity must be granted before faith as act, and so sinners are first passive as recipients of the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration in order that they may subsequently be active as those experiencing rebirth and new life.⁹⁵

Bavinck also notes that the word regeneration, in terms of theological formulation, has been understood in at least three senses: (1) as descriptive of “the transformation that begins in the human consciousness as a result of the believing acceptance of the gospel ...” (which he views as defective and prone to foster misunderstanding); (2) as descriptive, broadly conceived, of “the total renewal of a person,” brought about by

⁹² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 56.

⁹³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 57.

⁹⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 65, 68.

⁹⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 66–68; idem, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 419–23.

and coinciding with faith (this view, too, was prone to misinterpretation); and (3) as descriptive, narrowly or strictly conceived, of an infusion of new life prior to faith and repentance. Understood in this last sense, regeneration was distinguished from “the progress of regeneration,” the latter reality being given such titles as repentance, renewal, and sanctification.⁹⁶

Regeneration, then, conceived in the restricted sense, “does not include the growth and development of the new life but suggests the genesis or origin of that life.”⁹⁷ Of course, in terms of theological formulation, this definition is more refined than the way Scripture usually speaks. But Reformed writers have always been aware of this, and in speaking of regeneration in this restricted sense they have distinguished between “the activity of God by which he regenerates, and the fruit of that activity in the person who is being regenerated; in other words, between active and passive regeneration.”⁹⁸ The former is nothing else than “the efficacious call of God.” The latter is our active engagement and response to that call, whereby we learn as God teaches, we follow as he draws, we accept as he endows, we blossom and flourish as he plants and waters and grants the increase.⁹⁹ But the former always precedes the latter, for this is simply to affirm that the grace of God in Christ is “grace that is full, abundant, free, omnipotent, and insuperable,” which is “the heart of the gospel.”¹⁰⁰

It is important to observe that, for Bavinck, the blessings of regeneration are not divorced from Christ and the covenant of grace. Indeed, he argues that the benefits of the covenant of grace are “applied and distributed only in the internal calling,” which from the human side of things means that these are “passively accepted” in regeneration. And so whether this regeneration “takes place in childhood, youth, or later, before or during the hearing of the Word, *logically it always precedes the act of really believing.*”¹⁰¹ To press this point, Bavinck cites Maccovius who said that to hear the Word “salvifically” requires that one is regenerate.¹⁰² As noted above, Bavinck readily grants that regeneration in the restricted sense, as the infusion of the principle of the new life, may ... precede faith.” Indeed, it can “occur in infancy before the awakening of consciousness, in or before baptism, even before birth.”¹⁰³ No door stands bolted and locked before God that would prevent him from effectuating his saving mercy, for there is “no heart inaccessible” to him.¹⁰⁴

With his Spirit he can enter the innermost being of every human, with or without the Word, by way of or apart from all consciousness, in old age

⁹⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 76.

⁹⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 76.

⁹⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 77. For Bavinck’s exposition of active regeneration, see IV, 87–95.

⁹⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 77.

¹⁰⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 87.

¹⁰¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 123; *italics added.*

¹⁰² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 123.

¹⁰³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 123.

¹⁰⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 123.

or from the moment of conception. Christ’s own conception by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb is proof that the Holy Spirit can, from that moment on and continually, be active in a human being with his sanctifying presence.¹⁰⁵

Like Kuyper, Bavinck draws comfort from this doctrine. He appeals to the language of the Canons of Dort, I, art. 17, which bids godly parents not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls from this life at a tender age. Thus Bavinck explicitly affirms the doctrine of immediate regeneration, where regeneration is understood in the restricted sense, for this is simply to affirm that such a regeneration encompasses “in principle the whole person, initially renewing all of one’s capacities and powers, and later manifesting and confirming itself in all directions, in faith and repentance, in sanctification and good works.”¹⁰⁶

Moreover, we would be derelict in presenting Bavinck’s views if we failed to observe that, for Bavinck, all the blessings of salvation are tied to the covenant of grace and are only bestowed upon a person unto salvation *in union with Christ*. This is not a small point for Bavinck; it ought to be “in the foreground of our consciousness,” for “all the benefits of salvation are secured by Christ and present in him....” In fact, Christ distributes all the blessings of the covenant of grace at his pleasure, which include regeneration or new birth, faith and repentance, reconciliation and forgiveness, renewal and sanctification.¹⁰⁷ All these saving gifts and blessings are received only “in communion with Christ,” for they never exist independent of him and he himself secured them for his people. And these benefits, all of them, are applied and distributed individually to persons “only in the internal calling,” “passively accepted on the human side in regeneration”; and in logical order “always precedes the act of really believing.”¹⁰⁸

Thus far we have considered Bavinck’s treatment of this topic principally as presented in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. It should be noted, however, that he directly takes up this issue also in his book, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* [Calling and Regeneration], where it receives a slightly different accent.¹⁰⁹ This work was written between the first and second editions of Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*. The occasion for this volume had to do with Kuyper’s accent upon immediate regeneration and his doctrine of assumed regeneration. In fact, Kuyper’s views had generated enough of a controversy among the churches that Bavinck felt compelled to illuminate the perimeters and heart of the controversy. In the preface to the above mentioned book, Bavinck tells his readers that he wishes to bring “greater clarity concerning the doctrine of immediate regeneration,” with the aim of facilitating peace in the churches, such that “difference of insight” need not devolve into a disunity of confession. For, indeed, serious disunity was manifesting itself among the churches at that time.

¹⁰⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 123.

¹⁰⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 124.

¹⁰⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 122.

¹⁰⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 122–23.

¹⁰⁹ Herman Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* (Kampen: Ph. Zalsman, 1903). See footnote 1 (in English published as *Saved by Grace*).

In blazing a trail through this debate, Bavinck begins by outlining the concern of opponents to the doctrine of immediate regeneration. First, according to the critics, this doctrine, coupled with the doctrine of an assumed regeneration, is said to undercut the call to repentance and the call to a life of faithful obedience. If one is presumed saved, then preaching no longer lays claim upon the human heart. The pulpit is emasculated. Meanwhile, and second, inasmuch as the followers of Kuyper followed him also in embracing supralapsarianism, this tended to turn the gospel into bad news for sinners—a message that is as much a sentence of death as it is an announcement of life. Third, when immediate regeneration is conjoined to the doctrine of eternal justification, the practical effect is to make salvation simply a matter of believers *becoming aware* of a grace that long ago was bestowed upon and effected in them—that over against salvation as a living encounter with God in the call of the gospel. Finally, since immediate regeneration brought with it the notion of a seed of life implanted within the regenerated, a seed that can remain dormant for very many years without germinating and showing signs of life, the interval between regeneration and conversion—the latter being the actual coming of the sinner to faith and repentance—could likewise be very long, with the consequence that those with new life in them can live for many years as though completely dead in sin. This does not encourage a life of piety.¹¹⁰

In order to evaluate these charges, Bavinck sets forth three principal questions, which in turn form the focus of Bavinck's study. The first question concerns the manner in which the Holy Spirit works within the human heart. Is this from a distance and through ordinary means or does the Holy Spirit draw close and directly impart the blessing of regeneration? The answer to this question distinguishes defenders of sovereign grace from defenders of free will. The second question inquires into the use of means, for if it is the case that the Holy Spirit directly effectuates spiritual rebirth in the hearts of fallen people, are all means to be excluded or regarded as redundant? The answer to this query sets proponents of the effectual use of means apart from Enthusiasts and Anabaptists who regard means as empty signs. The third question (assuming that the use of means is not detrimental to a proper view of the Spirit's work of regeneration in the human heart) concerns the connection between the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit and the role of means in this operation. In answering this question the Reformed distinguish themselves from Roman Catholics and Lutherans alike, both of which tie grace too exclusively and mechanically to the use of means.¹¹¹

Bavinck proceeds to delineate what the immediate (or unmediated) operation of the Holy Spirit means. As we saw above, the Reformed were not completely united in how to describe the initial moment of the application of salvation, especially the relation between the external call of the gospel and the elect coming to rebirth and life. Clearly, this first coming to life had to be at God's initiative and completely his work. Fallen hu-

¹¹⁰ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 7–17; *Saved by Grace*, 3–9.

¹¹¹ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 17–18; *Saved by Grace*, 9–10.

mans do not distinguish themselves from one another, for in salvation, initially, they are altogether “receptive and passive.”¹¹² An internal, hidden, effectual grace is acknowledged and confessed by all the Reformed—indeed, the internal call is what this is. The nomenclature of “immediate regeneration” was, however, not yet common. But that does not mean this terminology is impermissible, for God does act immediately and directly upon a person to infuse him or her with new life. It is noteworthy that at this point Bavinck quotes Kuyper favorably inasmuch as Kuyper rightly champions Calvinism as the safeguard of the gospel of grace.¹¹³

Bavinck also reminds us that the gospel of grace was once under attack through the teachings of the Remonstrants. He succinctly outlines some of the principal teachings of the Canons of Dort, especially under heads III-IV, wherein human depravity and irresistible grace are carefully treated. In doing so, Bavinck arrives at the answer to the first key question—namely, In what manner does the Holy Spirit work within the human heart?—that is, is this a direct and irresistible operation or does he make use of means? The answer is not in dispute: the Word of God in and by itself is insufficient for regenerating and bringing the sinner to faith and conversion, but must be accompanied by an internal grace, by the Holy Spirit’s work, which is internal, spiritual, supernatural, effectual, invincible, and irresistible.¹¹⁴

Bavinck is concerned to relate the doctrine of immediate regeneration to the Reformed understanding of the means of grace. Leaving aside his discussion of covenant children (having considered that issue above), we turn to Bavinck’s discussion of covenant adults and their spiritual state in relation to preaching as a means of grace. Bavinck notes: whereas it is wrongheaded to treat covenant people as unbelievers, it is likewise wrongheaded to fail to call them to faith and repentance after the pattern of the Old Testament prophets, as well as John the Baptist and Jesus.¹¹⁵ Similarly, the apostolic letters refer to the covenant people as God’s elect and members of Christ, yet the churches could be infected with hypocrites not yet detected and with various forms of error and unrighteousness that require continual calls to faith and repentance. Scripture teaches us to regard one another as God’s people, but also to be aware that false brothers and sisters slip in as fakes, and they do not constitute the essence of the church.¹¹⁶

This discussion clears the way for Bavinck to take up calling and regeneration in relation to the preaching of the gospel. Here Bavinck contrasts a Reformed understanding with a Methodistic approach.¹¹⁷ He also contrasts it with an approach that assumes that all in the church are saved and therefore they should only hear preaching which edifies—that over against a preaching that also exposes sin, hypocrisy, and, conse-

¹¹² Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 24–26; *Saved by Grace*, 15–17.

¹¹³ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 26–28; *Saved by Grace*, 17–18.

¹¹⁴ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 28–45; *Saved by Grace*, 19–29. See also Bavinck’s analysis of the Reformed versus the Remonstrant position in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 82–87.

¹¹⁵ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 157–69; *Saved by Grace*, 110–116.

¹¹⁶ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 169–72; *Saved by Grace*, 117–118.

¹¹⁷ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 172–75; *Saved by Grace*, 119–121.

quently, calls to faith and conversion. The ethical method of preaching inevitably leads to dead orthodoxy, says Bavinck.¹¹⁸ He believes both forms of proclamation are necessary in the church; otherwise one-sidedness is the result—the one-sidedness of assumed regeneration and the one-sidedness of assumed non-regeneration.¹¹⁹

This is the answer to the second key question—does the direct operation of the Holy Spirit exclude the use of means? Bavinck maintains that though the Spirit's work is internal and irresistible, the Reformed never called regeneration "immediate" in contrast with and to the exclusion of the Word as a means of grace, to which the Holy Spirit joins himself and makes effectual.¹²⁰

The last question posed asked about the relation that exists between the Spirit's immediate operation and the use of means.¹²¹ Bavinck follows Dort, which asserts that the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit upon the human heart in regeneration is marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible. This does not, however, exclude the use of means in every respect, nor does it deny the power of means. This is not unrelated to the doctrine of divine providence, wherein the Creator/creature distinction is carefully preserved. The divine decree, too, is important since it shows us that God's ways with humans are integrated, involving means and ends, pathways and outcomes. The means that God uses for the sinner's redemption is not something we are capable of describing in fixed and clear formulations. Various formulations were attempted in the Middle Ages, including the physical operation view and the moral operation view. Rome adopted the former and rejected the latter view, while the Reformed endorsed the latter view and rebuffed the former.¹²²

Inasmuch as the Reformed regarded the Word as the principal means of grace, and inasmuch as they viewed the means of grace as possessing a moral operation, this entails that the Word as a means of grace, as a moral operation, refers to the external call of the Word, in both law and gospel. The divine Logos, of course, possesses more than a moral working power, but also a creating and re-creating power, which includes the speaking-power of God in creation and providence. However, when Scripture refers to the Word as the message contained in the Bible in the form of law and of gospel, then that Word, in itself, has power only as a moral operation—appealing, admonishing, persuading. In itself, and as such, it is not an agent. Without the agency of the Holy Spirit it functions as an external call; only with the agency of the Holy Spirit does it function as the internal call and therefore in a saving way.¹²³

The consequences of this observation are obvious: regeneration precedes the saving hearing of the Word, at least in sequence. Thus a distinction is required between how the Word operates in regeneration and how it operates in faith and conversion. In the case of adults, regenera-

¹¹⁸ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 176–78; *Saved by Grace*, 121–122.

¹¹⁹ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 178–87; *Saved by Grace*, 122–128.

¹²⁰ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 189–190; *Saved by Grace*, 132.

¹²¹ See Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, see 188ff.; *Saved by Grace*, 131ff.

¹²² Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 190–203; *Saved by Grace*, 132–140.

¹²³ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 204–13; *Saved by Grace*, 142–146.

tion and conversion generally coincide; as for covenant infants, the Holy Spirit is free to regenerate them at a tender age before they are capable of manifesting the signs of new life in the acts of faith and repentance.¹²⁴

In any case, Bavinck shows that the Word has a role in regeneration, for external calling and internal calling are of one fabric. Although they are not always united with one another, such is more an exception than a rule; and the Reformed have always been concerned to keep them connected to each other. Indeed, regeneration is a fruit of the Holy Spirit and is usually connected to the instrumentality of the gospel proclaimed. This is not to deny that a distinction may be made between how the Word functions in regeneration and how it functions in faith and conversion. The Word is indispensable in the act of faith, for the Holy Spirit uses the Word as the means whereby a person proceeds from the capacity for faith to the act of faith. This is not to turn the Word into an agent—the Holy Spirit remains the agent who moves us to faith and trust in Christ—but it is to affirm that the Word is a moral instrument in the Spirit’s hands, supplying the believer with the language and the content of the message of the gospel and engaging the faculties of the believer in the way of faith and repentance.¹²⁵ Meanwhile, with respect to regeneration, every Reformed person must acknowledge that the Spirit runs ahead and gives us ears to hear and eyes to see. The Spirit must first prepare the soil to make it good in order that the Word may be sown in good soil. To deny this is to succumb to the Remonstrant position. Nonetheless, the moral suaveness of the Word can still work simultaneously with the regenerating action of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the sinner. In short, regeneration may ordinarily occur under, by, and with the Word, but never through the Word, for the Spirit can and does regenerate apart from the Word, and the Word has no infused power in itself that can effect regeneration.¹²⁶

Rather than render preaching superfluous, preaching is shown to be God’s chosen instrument for the work of salvation. The church is not only commanded to preach the gospel, but the parable of the sower powerfully exhibits its saving fruit. God attaches his promise to the proclaimed gospel; believers find assurance through the proclaimed gospel and are warned to examine themselves. God extends his promises to us in the proclaimed gospel, and also to our children. It is God’s chosen instrument, his power to save those who believe; yet even in speaking of the power of the Word, we must remember that God, not the Word, is the agent of salvation.¹²⁷

Finally, the solution to the issue in controversy requires that we carefully appreciate the different ways that Scripture uses the term “regeneration.” We must distinguish regeneration in the metaphysical sense from regeneration in the ethical or moral sense, but we may not divorce them from one another, for the former is manifest in the latter. Little children, not yet reaching the age of discretion, are certainly the objects

¹²⁴ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 213–17; *Saved by Grace*, 147–150.

¹²⁵ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 217–20; *Saved by Grace*, 150–151.

¹²⁶ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 220–21; *Saved by Grace*, 151–152.

¹²⁷ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 222–33; *Saved by Grace*, 153–159.

of God's saving operations, but as a rule and ordinarily God delights to make use of his own ordained means to bring us into a saving and fruitful relation to him.¹²⁸

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

1. The calling of the gospel is of the greatest importance and may not, because of divine election, be a message restricted only to the elect.

2. Scripture speaks of regeneration in a threefold sense: (a) as the principle (*beginse*) of new life that is implanted in man prior to faith; (b) as moral renewal; and (c) as the restoration of all things.

3. Calvin and other Reformers, as well as the Belgic Confession, present faith as preceding regeneration. However, the order was later reversed especially for two reasons: (a) the struggle against the Anabaptists, such that it became necessary in regard to little children to speak of the implanting of a first principle of life; and (b) the struggle against the Remonstrants, such that it became necessary to accent the total depravity of humans, which in turn required that God implant a first principle of life, wherein a person remains wholly passive.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

12. The disposition (*habitus*) and nature (*qualitates*) given to man by regeneration owe their stability and durability to the Holy Spirit, who

¹²⁸ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 233–45; *Saved by Grace*, 160–167.

elevates the life implanted with regeneration above sin, destruction, and death.¹²⁹

2.4. *Assumed Regeneration as the Ground for Infant Baptism*

2.4.1. Kuyper’s burden for assumed regeneration

Finally, Kuyper’s views on the fourth issue, namely *assumed regeneration* (*onderstelde wedergeboorte*)—often translated as presumed or presumptive regeneration—had to do principally with the ground for infant baptism.¹³⁰ Kuyper argued that a principal ground for administering the sacrament of baptism to the infants of believers is that we may assume their regeneration on the strength of God’s promise to them. Kuyper posited this idea, it seems, in order to combat two errors, namely the error surrounding the idea of a *volkskerk* or national church on the one hand, which breeds presumption, religious formalism, and produces congregations of baptized but unsaved persons; and the error of a certain type of Reformed pietism, where Methodist tendencies prevail, such that the baptized are reckoned lost until they come to a conversion experience in their early adult years or later in life and can testify of that experience, offering a narrative of grace.

Kuyper’s doctrine of an assumed regeneration, that assumption forming the principal ground for the administration of baptism to infants, sought to run parallel with the assumption the church makes in administering baptism to adult converts, for the church baptizes adults with the assumption of their regeneration, certainly not with the assumption of their non-regeneration. What is more, in presenting this view, Kuyper departs from a view that he first presented in his work on the divine covenants (*De Leer der Verbonden*), published in 1885. In that work Kuyper uses an older writer as an authority, whom he describes as “discerning” or “perceptive,” namely Johannes Conradus Appelius (1715–1798).¹³¹ Appelius certainly did not teach an assumed regeneration; to

¹²⁹ Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 271–72. For Bremmer’s whole discussion of Bavinck on regeneration, 261–72; cf. Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop*, 185–94. Bavinck treats this entire topic, calling and regeneration, as well as faith and conversion, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 33–175.

¹³⁰ Note: the Dutch words Kuyper uses are *veronderstelling*, *onderstelling*, *veronderstellen*, *onderstellen* and are best rendered into English as assumption or presuppose, to assume or to presuppose, rather than presumption or to presume, inasmuch as the latter terms have more of a negative edge to them, rendering the wrong connotation. Also it should be strongly noted that a doctrine of “assumed regeneration” is not at all an endorsement of, nor does it entail, a doctrine of “baptismal regeneration.” On baptismal regeneration, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 477.

¹³¹ Appelius was a eighteenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, who served four pastorates, the first at Jukwert, the second at Appingedam, where he also served as the rector of the Latin school, the third at Uithuizen, and then at Zuidbroek, where he spent the majority of his years, from 1751/2 till his death in 1798. H. H. Kuyper explains why Kuyper appealed to Appelius in this connection: inasmuch as most of the older Dutch Reformed theologians wrote in Latin, and most of their works were no longer readily available, Kuyper looked to those writers who wrote in Dutch and whose writings were of more recent vintage. Thus theologians like Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711), Alexander Comrie (1706–1774), and J. C. Appelius presented themselves as writers familiar to the popular audience Kuyper was addressing, and whose works the common people could read. What is more, Appelius, more than the others,

the contrary, Appellius vigorously argued that the covenant itself was sealed only to the church in general, and the church consisted only of true believers. Thus the sacrament of baptism is sealed only to believers, and until a baptized person becomes a believer in the way of faith and repentance, he has no part of the promises. The promises only belong to the baptized *in becoming believers*. Appellius therefore taught that the ground for baptism is the promise of God, but he also taught that God does not seal the promise to the baptized child in baptism, nor is the promise sealed to the parents of the child; rather, the promise is sealed to “the church with which God has made his covenant concerning her seed.” This allowed for the idea of an empty baptism or an invalid baptism *with respect to the baptized child*, though baptism was always a valid baptism for the whole body of the saved, the church. Baptism, then, for Appellius, was a sacrament for the church in general, not for any covenant child in particular. Infant baptism likewise was not for the strengthening of the faith of the baptized child, for the child does not present him- or herself for baptism; instead, the church desires baptism and receives baptism in the body of that child. In this way Appellius made the faith of the church the ground of baptism; and in this way he could advocate a broad baptismal practice, yet baptism itself is not valid or applicable, in a sealing sense, to all the baptized.¹³²

It was such sentiments that Kuyper, in the early 1880s, reproduced verbatim from Appellius, covering some ten pages. However, writing ten years later, he repudiates that position. Kuyper explains that the light concerning the mystery of baptism began to shine for him first in 1890 and he rejects his earlier naïve appeal to Appellius. He explains that he was nurtured in Ethical theology and had no teachers to direct him in the Reformed way. He had to venture on his own; and in addressing some practical matters on baptism in that earlier work, he too hastily used Appellius as a guide.¹³³

Thus, when Kuyper was writing his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, later published as *E Voto Dordraceno*, 4 vols. (1892–95), he had abandoned his strict adherence to Appellius’s views and now advocated his doctrine of an assumed regeneration as the ground of infant baptism. This is reflected in his devotional book *Voor een Distel een Mirt* (1891), which treats the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and public profession of faith.¹³⁴ Let it be observed, in Kuyper’s advocacy

treated at length the doctrine of the covenant of grace and, with that doctrine, he also had a fulsome discussion of the sacraments, baptism being understood as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace (see *Kuyper-Bibliographie*, ed. J. C. Rullmann, 3 vols. [Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1929], II, 118–119; also G. Kramer, *Het Verband van Doop en Wedergeboorte: nagelaten dogmenhistorische studie* [Breukelen: “De Vecht”, 1897], 351–354).

¹³² The quoted pages of Appellius can be found in A. Kuyper’s *De Leer der Verbonden: Stichtelijke Bijbelstudien (Uit het Woord—Vijfde Bundel)* (1885; repr. Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909), 198–207.

¹³³ See C. Veenhof, *Predik het Woord: Gedachten en beschouwingen van Dr A. Kuyper over prediking* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, n.d.), 243–44, and 315 fn. 222. Veenhof cites Kuyper’s comments as recorded in “De Bazuin,” 15 November, 1895.

¹³⁴ A. Kuyper, *Voor een Distel een Mirt: Geestelijke Overdenkingen bij den Heiligen Doop, het Doen van Belijdenis en het Toegaan tot het Heilig Avondmaal* (Amsterdam: Hóveker & Wormser, 1891), 69, 72.

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

Thus, given the divine promise, Kuyper believes that God is already efficaciously working salvation in the life of a covenant child; and this is why he insists that faith is the only proper reply to God’s Word of promise. So, inasmuch as little infants are incapable of manifesting the evident signs of the new life and rebirth, the church proceeds to administer baptism to them with the assumption—a faith assumption—that God is already working regeneration in them, which is God’s initial salvific work of blessing, and which subsequently, in time, blossoms forth into manifest faith and repentance.¹³⁵

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

¹³⁵ See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 9–12.

under this assumption, then we ought to abandon the practice of infant baptism.¹³⁶

Kuyper believes that the assumptive posture has practical benefits. He offers the illustration of a person who has two gems, but he does not have absolute certainty whether one or both of them are valuable diamonds or cheap glass. Without such certainty, he does well to regard both of them as expensive diamonds and to treat them accordingly—and so he protects them and keeps them safe from thieves, etc. Assuming both stones to be genuine diamonds means that the owner will not treat them as little, valueless pieces of glass. No, he will handle them as diamonds should be handled. Says Kuyper, likewise covenant children—although we do not have absolute certainty whether any given covenant child is a diamond or glass (elect or reprobate), we should regard them as diamonds and assume that the Holy Spirit is already working his regenerative grace in them and so take care of them accordingly.¹³⁷

In expositing his view of assumed regeneration, Kuyper echoes the language of the Belgic Confession, art. 34, which teaches that the sacrament of baptism uses an outward washing with water to signify an inward cleansing through the blood of Christ, and that whereas ministers give us the sacrament and what is visible, the Lord gives what baptism signifies—namely the invisible gifts and graces; washing, purifying, and cleansing of our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort, etc.¹³⁸ However, Kuyper proceeds to assert explicitly that where these two features of the sacramental rite are not conjoined—that is, where God does not impart the thing signified as symbolized in the outward act of the minister, there we see the sacrament *in appearance* rather than *in reality*. This is simply to say, without the thing signified only an outward and visible sign is set forth, not the spiritual, invisible reality of Christ and his saving benefits.¹³⁹ When

¹³⁶ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 50, 67. Also see his *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 386–89 [299–301].

¹³⁷ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 12. Kuyper also emphasizes the practical benefit for parents whose children die in infancy or at a tender age. Given the high infant mortality rate at the time in which Kuyper lived, this was a very relevant pastoral issue. See his comments in *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 6–7.

¹³⁸ See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 534–35, 538.

¹³⁹ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 535. This is not to be confused with his earlier view, which he subsequently repudiated, of *invalid baptism*. In fact, Kuyper's point here is standard Reformed theology, though Kuyper's terminology is less than felicitous. The Reformed have always distinguished “the sign” from “the thing signified,” though they are not to be separated from each other. No less in baptism than in the Lord's Supper, without faith and the Holy Spirit applying the thing signified to the heart, the recipients of the sacraments receive the form or shell or husk or outward dimension of the sacraments, but not their substance, matter, truth, and salvific blessing, i.e., Christ and all his saving benefits. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 477–90, 533–35; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Hugo Bekker (Dutch edition, 1954) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 149–153. Cf. Belgic Confession, art. 35. Jan Rohls observes, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 211–12, 214, that the *Genevan Catechism* states that unbelievers “make it [i.e., the grace offered through baptism] of no effect by their perversity,” so that “none but believers feel its efficacy.” Likewise the Bremen Consensus says that children of Christian parents are not “to be regarded as unbelieving like the children of Jews and Turks, but as believing. For they believe according to their measure: that is, they have a seed of faith though the secret working of the

that is the case, says Kuyper, then baptism has become “a lamp without light, a hearth without fire, a lung without breath, a heart without a beat.”¹⁴⁰ In short, if God does not act in the sacrament, the minister imparts nothing that has a spiritual benefit for the recipients—the water of baptism and the bread and wine of communion do not nurture anything to their souls. For only the Lord can nurture our souls with his grace, a fact that applies also to the preaching of the Word. Unless the Holy Spirit performs the inner, spiritual proclamation within our hearts, the outward preaching is impotent as to any saving benefit for the hearers. What all of this comes to, for Kuyper, is not difficult to sum up: the essence of a sacrament consists in this joint activity of both the outward rite performed by the minister and the inward grace imparted by the Lord himself.¹⁴¹

For his part, Kuyper believes that we ought to trust that God is acting in the sacrament, for sacraments function to nurture and confirm us in faith. Thus when the minister acts in administering the sacrament, we should believe that the Lord is likewise administering grace to the soul of the baptized child.¹⁴² Moreover, Kuyper believes that his doctrine is a faithful interpretation of the Form for Baptism, has ancient Reformed pedigree, and offers a much needed remedy to the blind ritualism that plagues the national church idea (*volkskerk*) out of which he came.¹⁴³

2.4.2. Bavinck’s restrained assessment of assumed regeneration

As for Bavinck, although he does not always mention Kuyper by name, he clearly opposed his predecessor’s doctrine of assumed regeneration as *the ground of baptism*. The right to baptism, for both adults and children, is derived from the covenant of grace, to which they are parties. “Not regeneration, faith, or repentance, much less our assumptions pertaining to them, but only the covenant of grace” form the ground for baptism. There is “no other, deeper, or more solid ground” for baptism.¹⁴⁴ This does not preclude, however, that covenant infants can possess “the disposition (*habitus*) of faith.” As Bavinck explains, the Re-

Holy Spirit before, in and after baptism. Holy baptism seals and increases this seed of faith (M 770, 16–20).”

¹⁴⁰ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 535. This applies to the Lord’s Supper as well.

¹⁴¹ Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 535.

¹⁴² Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 535.

¹⁴³ See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 51–53; 56–60. Also see Kuyper’s foreword to G. Kramer’s work *Het Verband van Doop en Wedergeboorte* (1897), a work that seeks to demonstrate the pedigree of Kuyper’s views by examining the views of numerous Reformed thinkers on this topic. Kuyper argues in his foreword that the Reformed doctrine of baptism cannot be understood without grasping also the views of their opponents, particularly the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans, each arguing for doctrines of baptismal regeneration, as well as the Anabaptists, who denied infant baptism altogether and conceived of baptism only as a believer’s testimony of faith. Calvin is the first and most authoritative voice for the Reformed in this regard, but subsequent Reformed authors had to wage further polemics against various opponents. In the course of time, a certain stripe of pietism infected the Reformed tradition, corrupting both the doctrine of the church and of baptism, which stand or fall together. Thus the Reformed view that was forged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was compromised and lost in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the pietist onslaught.

¹⁴⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 525.

formed used a rich terminology to refer to this, such as: “the seed, the root, the inclination, the potency, the disposition, or the principle of faith, or the seed of regeneration, and so forth.” In any case, the Reformed were in complete agreement on this matter, though the terminology varied. Key texts were Jer. 1:5 and Luke 1:35, both of which demonstrated that God can perform the work of regeneration from infancy, even in the womb. The Reformed championed this doctrine and used it against the Anabaptists.¹⁴⁵

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

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

There were those who sought as long and as closely as possible to maintain the unity of election and covenant. They asserted, accordingly, that all children born of believing parents had to be regarded—according to the judgment of charity—as regenerate until in their witness or walk they clearly manifested the contrary, or that at least the elect children were usually regenerated by the Spirit of God before baptism or even before birth (à Lasco, Ursinus, Acronius, Voetius, Witsius, et al.). But others, noting the problems of experience, which so often tells us that baptized children grow up without showing any sign of spiritual life, did not dare to construe this regeneration before baptism as being the rule. They all without exception acknowledged that God’s grace is not bound to means and can also work regeneration in the heart of very young children, but they left open the question whether in the case of elect infants that regeneration occurred before, during, or also, sometimes even a great many years, after baptism (Calvin, Beza, Zanchius, Bucanus, Walaeus, Ames, Heidegger, Turretin, et al.). This view won the day when the church [subsequently], by its neglect of discipline, fell into decay. Election and church, the internal and external side of the covenant, concepts formerly held together as much as possible but increasingly differentiated since the days of Gomarus, moved ever farther apart. In the church (*ecclesia*) one saw the formation of the conventicle (*ecclesiola*). Gradually, therefore, baptism was totally separated from regeneration, and, since people nevertheless wanted to continue this sacrament for their children, it was understood in one of the following ways: (1) conceived and justified as a sacrament of the church and a pledge of the children of believers in general; (2) as a confirmation of the objective conditional promise of the gospel; (3) as proof of participation in the external covenant of grace; (4) as a guarantee of an amissible rebirth—not one that was inseparable from salvation but one that was later to be confirmed by a personal faith; (5) as a pedagogical device that at a larger age spurs the baptized on toward genuine repentance.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 525. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559). 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.xvi.17–22.

¹⁴⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 511; also 56–57, and 58 fn. 38. Lest Bavinck’s point be misunderstood, he is not asserting that the view proposed by Calvin, Beza, Zanchius, etc. constituted a neglect in ecclesiastical discipline or led to it; he is only saying that when discipline waned in the church, this view more easily conformed to experience, and the other

Let it be carefully noted, these five distinct views are the result of completely separating regeneration and baptism. At work in this separation is a species of pietism that requires a narrative of grace separated in time from baptism or that objectifies the sacrament in a manner that does not allow the simultaneous operation of a subjective grace, or that depersonalizes the promise of the covenant, making it into an offer of grace to covenant children in general, or that otherwise makes baptism a seal of the covenant promise as such but not a seal of the covenant promise unto the baptized child.

According to Bavinck, whereas it is necessary for the church to exercise “a judgment of charity” in baptizing both adults and children, inasmuch as it is impossible to make “an infallible pronouncement” concerning the salvific status of all the baptized, nonetheless the “basis for baptism is not the assumption that someone is regenerate, nor even that [there is] regeneration itself, but only the covenant of God.”¹⁴⁷

In Bavinck’s view, the doctrine of assumed regeneration makes the ground of baptism a “subjective opinion.” Rather than rest baptism upon an opinion, the church must administer baptism “in accordance with the revealed will of God and the rule of his Word.”¹⁴⁸ Moreover, we must admit that baptism is often administered to those who fail to show the fruits of faith and repentance and do not walk in the way of God’s covenant. There is chaff among the wheat, vessels of clay amidst vessels of silver and gold; indeed, not all is Israel that is called Israel. Assuming the regeneration of all covenant infants does not make it so, and their regeneration cannot be proved in any case.¹⁴⁹

In the Christian church, therefore, there is always room for the preaching of the gospel, of regeneration, faith, and repentance. The prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus all came to their people with that message, a people that after all was God’s own possession. The apostles too administered the Word not only to bring to expression the hidden life of faith; they also preached it as the seed of regeneration and as a means of making that faith effective.¹⁵⁰

It is not Bavinck’s aim to deny that the Holy Spirit may regenerate covenant infants at his discretion and according to his sovereign mercy, but he does oppose making this assumption concerning the Spirit’s possible preceding operation as *the ground* for baptizing infants.

view (as defended by Voetius, etc.) created greater theological problems. I have inserted the “subsequently” in square brackets into Bavinck’s text for clarity. Also see Herman Witsius, *Disquisitio Modesta et Placida de Efficacia et Utilitate Baptismi in Electis foederatorum Parentum Infantibus* (Utrecht, 1693), xxiv–lv; translated into English by William Marshall, edited and revised translation, with an Introduction by J. Mark Beach, “On the Efficacy and Utility of Baptism in the Case of Elect Infants Whose Parents Are under the Covenant of Grace,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 17 (2006): 121–190

¹⁴⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 531.

¹⁴⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 531.

¹⁴⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 531.

¹⁵⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 531.

Bavinck also treats the topic of assumed regeneration in his book on *Calling and Regeneration*.¹⁵¹ As we noted above, Bavinck, in treating the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace, also addresses this issue in connection with the moment of regeneration. By way of summary, we observe that Bavinck first notes Romish and Anabaptist errors in this regard, and then he considers the work of divine grace in covenant children, including covenant children who die in infancy. Here Bavinck carefully explores the views of Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) on the regeneration of covenant infants, i.e., assumed regeneration. Voetius was a very influential theologian of the seventeenth century, from whom Kuyper derived some of his own accents.¹⁵² Over against Voetius, Bavinck next introduces his readers to Jessaias Hellenius, a prominent eighteenth-century Reformed minister, who opposed Voetius's advocacy of the regeneration of covenant infants. Bavinck appeals to Hellenius, in part, in order to show that the Reformed, though not reaching unanimity on this topic, still allowed distinct views. But more, Bavinck wants to expose the weaknesses of the assumptive regeneration view, for he argues that the doctrine of assumed regeneration is not without serious theological and practical obstacles.¹⁵³

Specifically, Bavinck asserts that this view is speculative, "traveling through a terrain of guesswork."¹⁵⁴ It tries to know more than God has revealed in his Word; we simply cannot know when God ordinarily regenerates elect infants.¹⁵⁵ Besides, the problem of undetected hypocrites within the fellowship of the church cannot be eradicated, which means that unregenerate persons abide within the bosom of the church. Clearly, then, regeneration does not always precede baptism.¹⁵⁶ The doctrine of an assumed regeneration, moreover, has no practical benefit and can produce genuine practical harm, for the preaching of the gospel is still indispensable for nurturing elect infants in the way of faith.¹⁵⁷ Meanwhile, although an assumed regeneration need not suffer abuse, it is vulnerable to promoting false assurance inasmuch as one is tempted to focus upon regeneration instead of faith; and this in turn encourages a nominal Christianity that is spiritually superficial. Likewise, assumed regeneration might encourage the minister to confine the overtures of the gospel only to persons assumed to be regenerate, which, in effect, constitutes a premature reckoning, as if a person's destiny was decided at birth rather than at death. Preaching is thereby robbed of its seriousness. Finally, a doctrine of assumed regeneration could be construed in a manner that forms an obstacle to the free and well-meant offer of the gospel.¹⁵⁸

Bavinck, however, is aware that a potent counter-argument can be set forth in favor of immediate regeneration, namely, that calling cannot

¹⁵¹ See footnote 1 (in English, *Saved by Grace*).

¹⁵² Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 108–22; *Saved by Grace*, 78–85.

¹⁵³ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 122–36; *Saved by Grace*, 86–94.

¹⁵⁴ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 130; *Saved by Grace*, 90.

¹⁵⁵ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 130–31; *Saved by Grace*, 90–91.

¹⁵⁶ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 131–32; *Saved by Grace*, 91–92.

¹⁵⁷ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 132–33; *Saved by Grace*, 92.

¹⁵⁸ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 133–36; *Saved by Grace*, 92–94.

precede regeneration because deaf people cannot hear and dead people cannot make themselves live. Thus, God must first grant the new life of regeneration to the sinner if he or she is to have ears to hear and eyes to see and a heart capable of receiving the gospel in faith. Without regeneration preceding calling, calling is in vain.¹⁵⁹ Bavinck, of course, concedes this point but demonstrates that it is not strictly apropos. While Bavinck readily grants that God can work regeneration in the hearts of elect infants apart from their hearing and understanding the Word, uncertainty as to the actual moment of regeneration cannot be overcome. Bavinck carefully sorts out the Reformed opinion on this topic, showing why the Reformed in their *Dogmatics* have always treated calling as first in the order of salvation. It is again important to note that the Reformed forged their position on the anvil of controversy, for they ever had to present their views over against Anabaptist errors.¹⁶⁰

The Anabaptists, of course, operated with the notion of assuming the non-regeneration of infants and small children, and therefore did not permit the baptism of infants. They denied *means* of grace altogether. The Reformed, however, tied regeneration to the Word of the gospel as a genuine means of grace.¹⁶¹ The Reformed also had a much more nuanced understanding of the spiritual state of covenant infants, a topic that Scripture addresses rather meagerly. To be sure, Scripture informs us that God is the God of believers and their children, that such children are included in the covenant of grace, and that therefore they have the right to the sign and seal of that covenant, and that they must also be nurtured in the ways of the Lord. But many questions remain unanswered. Do passages like Jeremiah 1:5 and Luke 1:15 teach that children are regenerated in the womb? Bavinck argues that such texts are not conclusive, and God is free in his operations toward his elect.¹⁶² Similarly, does 1 Corinthians 7:14 teach regeneration from infancy? Bavinck maintains that this text does not refer to a “subjective, spiritual renewal” but to “an objective covenant relationship.”¹⁶³ Again, Bavinck does not deny that many covenant children are indeed regenerated in their youth and even prior to being baptized, nor does Bavinck wish to subvert in any way the comfort that believing parents ought to have regarding the election and salvation of their children who die at a tender age. Early regeneration is possible, but Scripture does not allow us to know beyond what it teaches; and we must resist being overly curious about such matters.¹⁶⁴

Meanwhile, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck is not afraid to affirm, in the language of the Form for Baptism, that just as the children of believers are without their knowledge conceived and born in sin, subject to eternal damnation, likewise without their knowledge “they can be regenerated by the Holy Spirit and endowed with the capacity to believe

¹⁵⁹ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 136; *Saved by Grace*, 95.

¹⁶⁰ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 136–43; *Saved by Grace*, 95–99.

¹⁶¹ See Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 143–57; *Saved by Grace*, 100–109.

¹⁶² Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 150–53; *Saved by Grace*, 104–106.

¹⁶³ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 153–56; *Saved by Grace*, 106–108.

¹⁶⁴ Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 156–57; *Saved by Grace*, 108–109.

(what Kuyper calls the seed or faculty of faith),” and so likewise “they can also without their knowledge be strengthened in that capacity by the same Spirit.”¹⁶⁵ But when the Form for Baptism calls the children of believers “sanctified in Christ,” which is found in the first question put to the presenting parents, Bavinck disputes Kuyper’s view that 1 Corinthians 7:14 defines the meaning of these words as used in the Form for Baptism. In fact, Bavinck briefly traces out the controversy that has surrounded these words with respect to their meaning and implications. For some, the phrase “sanctified in Christ” refers to an “internal renewal by the Holy Spirit”; for others, the words are problematic and ought to be set aside; and for still others the words refer only to an objective, external covenant membership.¹⁶⁶ Bavinck disapproves of the way the Reformed doctrine of baptism was to devolve among the Reformed churches under the influence of pietism, a devolution that Kuyper attempted to remedy by ascribing a special grace to baptism—namely a disposition to seek the fellowship or communion of the saints as body of Christ.¹⁶⁷

Here we note that, for Bavinck, the phrase “sanctified in Christ,” as found in the Form for Baptism, has been understood by the Reformed churches in general to refer to an objective, external sort of covenant membership. He sees this as particularly reflective of eighteenth-century Reformed theology in the Netherlands, under the influence of pietism. His own view, however, is marked off from that consensus. Bavinck argues that 1 Corinthians 7:14 is not in view when the Form for Baptism speaks of covenant children as “sanctified in Christ.” In fact, if the author of the Form had this text in mind, he did so erroneously. The reference to the holiness of children as we find this in 1 Corinthians 7:14 is very different from the words of the Form for Baptism, that covenant children are “sanctified *in Christ*.”¹⁶⁸ For the sanctity or holiness of covenant children *in Christ* is derived from texts like John 17:17 (“Sanctify them in the truth”); 1 Corinthians 6:11 (“but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God”); Ephesians 5:26 (“That he [Christ] might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word”); Hebrews 2:11 (“or both he that sanctifies and they who are sanctified *are* all of one”); Hebrews 10:10 (“by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all”), and the like. Indeed, the spirit and

¹⁶⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 532. See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 543; idem, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 382 passim [295 passim]. The Hungarian Confession speaks of a “seed of faith” (*semen fidei*) in children (M 422, 3ff.), as does the Bremen Consensus; see Rohls, *Reformed Confessions*, 214.

¹⁶⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 511–12; idem, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 150–57; *Saved by Grace*, 104–109. See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 541 ff.; III, 51. Also see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1992–1996), XIX.xx.9, where he maintains that the holiness referred to in 1 Cor. 7:14 is a “federal holiness,” which means they are regarded as “Christians and belonging to the church”—that in contrast to heathen children.

¹⁶⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 512–13. See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 463, 541, 553ff. Also see Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 82–89; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 637–642.

¹⁶⁸ See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 529.

the letter of the Form for Baptism excludes the notion of a merely objective, external sort of covenant membership. Christian baptism, as much for children as for adults, always signifies and seals the washing away of sins and renewal by the Holy Spirit. For both children and adults, the minister administers the visible sign, while Christ retains the right to administer or not administer the thing signified. Christ retains the truth of the sacrament, but this does absolutely no injury to the *essence* of baptism.¹⁶⁹

Bavinck argues that covenant children should be viewed, according to the judgment of charity, as elect and regenerated, unless their conduct and life give evidence to the contrary.¹⁷⁰ And he believes that the doctrine of regeneration, understood in the restricted sense of the infusion of the new life principle, has “an excellent pedagogical value.” As he states, “It is not an incontrovertible dogma, of course, that *all* covenant children or even all *elect* covenant children have already been regenerated in their infancy before or in baptism.”¹⁷¹ But Bavinck is not shy in admitting the possibility that spiritual rebirth in this sense may take place in infancy or early childhood, before such children reach the age of discretion, “since the Spirit of Christ is not bound to the consciousness and will of human beings.” The Reformed have always confessed that regeneration in this restricted sense “in fact often *did* take place,” particularly with respect to covenant children who die when they are very young. But as for the specific pedagogical significance of this doctrine, the Reformed, Bavinck observes, strongly believed that we must “regard and treat all covenant children born and baptized in the fellowship of the church not as pagan children, but in accordance with the judgment of charity, as true children of the covenant, until from their ‘talk’ and ‘walk’ the contrary is evident.”¹⁷² This clearly marks off the Reformed manner of nurturing covenant children from the approach of the Anabaptists and Methodists, for it

... maintains the bond between nature and grace; proceeds from the reality of the covenant of grace and baptism; believes in the unity and organic development of the spiritual life; and fully recognizes that God does not always work faith and repentance in the human heart suddenly, but often—indeed as a rule—causes them to proceed and develop from the implanted life gradually, by a psychological and pedagogical process.¹⁷³

In fairness to Kuyper, however, the above criticisms should be modulated a bit inasmuch as Kuyper himself would not dispute the above mentioned arguments. As J. C. Rullman has observed, when controversy first emerged concerning Kuyper’s little book *Voor een Distel een Mirt*

¹⁶⁹ Herman Bavinck, “De eerste doopvraag,” in *De Bazuin*, May 11, 1900, no. 19; May 18, 1900, no. 20. Cf. B. Wielenga, *Ons Doopsformulier*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d.), 226–51; and on Bavinck, 237ff., 241ff.; and also Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop*, 202–09. On the validity of baptism for covenant children, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 525–32.

¹⁷⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 57, footnote 36; 68, 80, 530–32.

¹⁷¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 124.

¹⁷² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 124.

¹⁷³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 125.

(1891), generating action at the General Synod of Middelburg in 1896, Kuyper subsequently clarified his view pertaining to the ground of baptism in *De Heraut* on 4 October 1896, in an article entitled “De Grond” (“The Ground”). Here Kuyper distinguishes four ways of thinking about the ground for baptism.¹⁷⁴ (1) If we speak of the ground upon which parents have the right (*het recht*) to request baptism for their children, then naturally for the parents the ground clearly rests in the divine ordinance of the covenant of grace. (2) If we speak of the ground upon which rests the right and duty of the church to administer baptism to the infants of its members, then the ground can only be, as before, God’s ordinance as set forth in the covenant of grace. (3) If, however, we speak of the ground upon which the ordinance in God’s name rests, then naturally the ground cannot be the covenant of grace, which God himself established; rather, the ground can only be his sovereign good pleasure. And finally (4) if we speak of the ground upon which rests the spiritual reality of baptism administered to an infant (as we have done), then naturally the only answer can be that the spiritual reality of baptism rests on nothing other than *regeneration*.¹⁷⁵

Thus Kuyper clearly affirms that the legal ground (*rechtsgrond*), as distinguished from a sacramental and a spiritual ground, for infant baptism rests in God’s covenant alone, for parents cannot know infallibly whether their child is regenerate. The church can judge only whether the child is born of believing parents and *in this fact alone*—that the child is included in the covenant promise of God as seed of believers—the legal ground for the baptism of infants is established for the church; and this rests upon nothing other than the rule of the covenant.¹⁷⁶

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

3. Assessing Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s Views in Light of “The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905”

As we have examined the views of Kuyper and Bavinck on the disputed topics treated at the Synod of Utrecht 1905, we are now in a position to present some evaluative comments regarding their respective positions pertaining to the points under discussion. In doing so, we will present the text of “The Conclusions of Utrecht.” The Conclusions, though they do not condemn Kuyper’s views, clearly travel along Bav-

¹⁷⁴ J. C. Rullman, *Kuyper-Bibliographie: Deel I (1860–1879); Deel II (1879–1890); Deel III (1891–1932)* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1923, 1929, 1940), III, 39–44, especially 43–44. Also see Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop*, 113–117.

¹⁷⁵ Rullman, *Kuyper-Bibliographie*, III, 44.

¹⁷⁶ Kuyper, *Gemeene Gratie*, II, 215.

inck’s theological highway. We will proceed by considering each issue in succession.

3.1. *Supralapsarianism and Infralapsarianism*

As we saw, Kuyper held to the supralapsarian position, but in a temperate manner. He viewed this scheme as coming closer to the full picture of Scripture. He did not, however, believe that it was adequate in itself, for Bavinck could quote him as conceding the inadequacies of both the infralapsarian and supralapsarian depictions of the ordering of God’s decrees. Kuyper also explicitly cautions against the dangers that menace the supralapsarian formulation, wherein the fall is deduced from the decree of God and God himself is rendered culpable for human sin, and even worst, the notion that God creates souls in order to damn them. Thus Kuyper was no zealot for supralapsarianism. He simply regarded the infralapsarian arrangement, which looks at the order of the divine decrees from a human perspective, as not really addressing the key questions and therefore not escaping any of the problems that the supralapsarian arrangement faces. Moreover, Kuyper did not attempt to tackle the large problems presented by God’s decree in relation to the fall of humanity, for the fall, like God’s mercy, is inscrutable to us; and Scripture does not provide an answer to this issue. As a consequence, we may not venture beyond Scriptural boundaries; rather, we must simply follow Scripture in confessing that all things come to pass according to God’s decree—beyond that, we face an impenetrable mystery.

Kuyper’s followers by and large adhered to the supralapsarian position as well. And speaking in generalities, it is probably fair to say that the propensity of the supralapsarian formulation is to so over-accent divine sovereignty as to minimize or under-accent or otherwise slight the use of means in the work of salvation. Though, in fairness to Kuyper, we do not find this trait.

Bavinck, for his part, examines the strengths and weaknesses of the infralapsarian and supralapsarian schemes, finally not favoring one over the other, for neither one is able to solve the mystery of evil or do full justice to “the many-sidedness of Scripture.”¹⁷⁷ On the mystery and in-

¹⁷⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), II, 388. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936–1969), II/2, 127–145; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 118–25; G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Hugo Bekker (Dutch edition, 1955) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 254–277; B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, revised ed. (1915, repr.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 23–29; 87–104; A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 2nd ed. (1879; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 200–13; 230–36; K. Dijk, *De strijd over Infra- en Supralapsarisme in de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1912); A. G. Honig, *Handboek van de Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1938), 262–71. Also see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, IV.xviii; Johannes Marckius, *Compendium theologiae christianae didactico-elencticum* (Amsterdam, 1686), caput 7, xvii–xxxvi; idem, *Christianae theologiae medulla didactico-elenctica* (Amsterdam, 1690), caput 7, xix–xxxvi; Franz Burman, *Synopsis theologiae et speciatim oeconomiae foederum Die*, 2 parts (Geneva, 1678; Den Haag, 1687), I, xxxviii; John Brown of Haddington, *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion, in seven books* (Glasgow: John Bryce for J. Matthews, 1782; revised edition, Edinburgh: Murray and Cochrane, 1796; reissued, Philadelphia: David Hogan, Griggs, & Co., 1819); reprinted as *The Systematic Theology of John Brown*, introduced by Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland:

explicability of the origin of evil, Kuyper and Bavinck are in full agreement. But unlike Kuyper, Bavinck is unwilling to adopt the supralapsarian formulation over against infralapsarianism. He sees certain strengths within each position, and so he finds himself neither wholly embracing nor wholly condemning one view over the other. Bavinck well sizes up the difference between the two positions as not merely the former viewing matters from a divine perspective while the latter sees things from a human perspective, as Kuyper had done; but more, the former considers God's purpose teleologically, whereas the latter considers God's purpose causally and historically. Both views, and Kuyper saw this as well, are finally grounded in God's inscrutable "good pleasure." But Bavinck, more deeply than Kuyper, recognized the problems resident in each scheme. His critique of supralapsarianism goes beyond Kuyper's warning and caution; he rightly identifies the parallelism which defines the supralapsarian arrangement and which therefore compromises the good news of the gospel, for it makes election to heaven and reprobation to hell parallel to one another. Christ's work unto salvation and sin's penalty unto damnation are likewise rendered parallel, each become a means to an end.

Bavinck, against Kuyper, does not commend supralapsarianism as capturing the divine perspective on the order of the decrees, since neither the infralapsarian view nor the supralapsarian view can describe *God's perspective*. Humans reason and know concursively, whereas God knows all things by a single intuition. No doubt, Kuyper would agree with that, but he fails to reckon with its significance for a consideration of the ordering of the divine decrees.

Interestingly, Bavinck follows out a Kuyperian accent in his own discussion of the divine decree when he urges readers to see God's decree as more comprehensive than the topic of predestination, embracing as it does the whole created order, and when he ties the doctrine of common grace to that created order and God's purpose.

The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905 sought settlement of this theological dispute as follows:

As for the first point, which has to do with *infra-* and *supralapsarianism*, Synod declares

- that, certainly with respect to the doctrine of election, our Confessional Standards follow the infralapsarian presentation, but, as is evident both from the wording of Head I, Article 7, of the *Canons of Dort* and from the deliberations at the Synod of Dort, it is by no means intended that the supralapsarian interpretation is thereby excluded or condemned;
- that, accordingly, on the one hand, it is not right to present the supralapsarian view as being properly *the* doctrine of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, nor on the other hand to harass anyone who has accepted the supralapsarian interpreta-

tion for himself, since the Synod of Dort did not make a decision regarding this disputed point.

To this the Synod adds the warning

- that such profound doctrines (which are beyond the comprehension of common people) should be brought to the pulpit as little as possible, and that one should adhere to the presentation given in our Confessional standards in the preaching of the Word and in catechetical instruction.¹⁷⁸

The Conclusions of Utrecht acknowledge that infralapsarianism is the presentation that the Three Forms of Unity follow, though supralapsarianism is not condemned. In this way, we see that Utrecht follows in Bavinck’s theological trajectory, for he likewise refuses to condemn the supralapsarian scheme. Utrecht also cautions against presenting the supralapsarian position as standard Reformed doctrine. Supralapsarianism is a view that therefore falls within confessional boundaries, which means one is free to advocate and defend that scheme. Thus the Synod of Utrecht in this respect and on this narrow point exonerates Kuyper and those who followed him. But Utrecht urged all not to drag these difficult matters of doctrines into the pulpit, i.e., “as little as possible.” Even more, all were urged to follow the arrangement of the order of the decrees that conforms to the presentation in the Three Forms of Unity, which means the infralapsarian model. On this matter, then, we see that Kuyper’s supralapsarianism is permitted but not encouraged. Infralapsarianism, despite its theological shortcomings, is to be preferred from a practical point of view. For the gospel is addressed to sinners who need rescue; and the gospel calls sinners, whether elect or reprobate, to faith and repentance, a point Bavinck well understood and emphasized.

3.2. *Justification from Eternity*

It is evident that Kuyper advocated an eternal justification, in part, to safeguard the biblical teaching that salvation is grounded in divine election and to emphasize that all the saving works of God, including the gift of faith wrought within the heart of the sinner, are according to God’s eternal counsel. In back of this doctrine lays Kuyper’s ever-present concern to secure the salvific status of deceased covenant infants.

Kuyper was not oblivious to the fine points of theology. He acknowledges five distinct senses in which one may speak of justification. But he places particular emphasis upon eternal justification; and here he took up a clearly minority position within the history of Reformed theology. Here also is where perhaps his supralapsarianism had “gone to seed”

¹⁷⁸ From the Acts of the General Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, held at Utrecht (1905), Art. 158. A printed English translation of the Conclusions of Utrecht (the Dutch original had been adopted in 1905 by the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) is reproduced from *Acts of Synod 1942 of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: n.p., [1942], Supplement XVII, pages 352-54. However, here and below, I have offered my own English translation of these materials.

(something that can be traced in certain other Reformed supralapsarians as well).

Bavinck treats this topic with his characteristic circumspection. He embraces the doctrine as valid *in a certain sense*. Indeed, most Reformed writers may well endorse the doctrine as valid *in a certain sense*. The question is whether Kuyper's presentation of the doctrine, and his rather vigorous advocacy of it, deserves endorsement. Bavinck states that the language of an eternal justification is not in accord with a scriptural manner of speaking. In fact, an equivocation is taking place, in which the term "justification" is divorced from the concrete reality of the incarnation and suffering of the eternal Son of God as the Christ of God. Kuyper, of course, is aware that the work of Christ, in concrete history, is necessary for the salvation of sinners, but he insists on speaking of justification from eternity as representative of the divine point of view, and as the ground upon which we conceive of the other senses in which we speak of the justification of the sinner.

Bavinck's discussion of this issue is helpful in demonstrating that the rise of neonomianism forms the occasion that led certain Reformed writers to appeal to a justification from eternity in order to protect the believers' acceptance before God as having nothing to do with their own works or their obedience to the law. While the motivation for this doctrine is commendable, Bavinck shows that its nomenclature was never universally accepted by the Reformed. Bavinck supports this doctrine insofar as it reminds us that all the blessings of salvation, including justification, in being expressions of the covenant of grace, are grounded in God's eternal decree and come to the elect according to God's love in Christ. Bavinck also observes that to posit a justification from eternity (or eternal justification), without qualifying remarks, is to commit a category mistake—the mistake of not marking the difference between God's decree and its execution.

The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905 are quite modulated in their critique of this doctrine:

Concerning the second point, *eternal justification*, Synod declares

- that this expression itself does not occur in our Confessions, but that on that account it may not be disapproved, any more than the expression "covenant of works," and such like, which are simply theological terms;
- that it is incorrect to say that our Confessions know only of a justification by and through faith, seeing that both the Word of God in Romans 4:25 and our Confession in Article 20 emphatically speak of an objective justification sealed by the resurrection of Christ, which, in temporal sequence, precedes subjective justification;
- that, as far as the matter itself is concerned, all our churches heartily believe and confess that Christ from eternity, in the counsel of peace, has given Himself as surety for His people, and has taken their guilt upon Himself, just as afterward, through His suffering and death on Calvary, He actually paid the ransom for us and reconciled us to God while we were yet

enemies, but that it must be maintained just as definitely, on the basis of the Word of God and in agreement with our Confessional Standards, that we personally become partakers of this benefit only by true faith.

For which reason the Synod earnestly warns against

- any presentation of the matter which detracts from either the eternal suretyship of Christ for His elect or the demand of true faith to be justified before the righteousness of God in the tribunal of conscience.

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

Let it be observed that there is an important difference between Christ giving himself from eternity to be surety of his people and his *actual* suffering and death at Golgotha, *actually paying the ransom for us*; thereby *reconciling us to God* while we were yet sinners. Utrecht follows Bavinck’s accents in acknowledging the legitimacy of the doctrine of eternal justification *in a certain sense*. Utrecht rightly grounds redemption in God’s divine decree and in the counsel of peace, wherein Christ offers himself as the surety for his people. But Utrecht also rightly understands that the decree and its execution must be distinguished, just as the counsel of peace and its enactment are distinguishable. The salvation of sinners requires both—which means it is mistaken to affirm eternal justification at the expense of Christ’s actual work of atonement and the demand of true faith for the sinner’s justification.

Indeed, to affirm Christ’s eternal suretyship is one thing, a naked doctrine of an eternal justification, without qualification, another; and to acknowledge that Christ objectively obtained for his own their justification through his redemptive work in history is very different from rendering history itself, and Christ’s salvific work in history for the sinner’s justification, secondary and anticlimactic, if not unnecessary. The demand and call to faith unto justification is part of the divine decree, i.e., it is part of God’s eternal will, to be effected in history.¹⁷⁹ It is simply mis-

¹⁷⁹ It should be noted that there have been a few Reformed writers who endorsed eternal justification, such as Alexander Comrie, *Brief over de regtvaardigmaking des zondaars: door de onmiddelyke toerekening der borggerechtigheit van Christus* (Amsterdam: Nicolaas Byl, 1761), 92–94; 106ff., idem, *Verhandeling van eenige eigenschappen des zaligmakenden geloofs: zynde een verklaring en toepassing van verscheide uitgekijpte texten des O. en N. Testaments* (Leiden: Johannes Hasebroek; Amsterdam: Nicolaas Byl, 1763), 64, 75; nonetheless, it has always been a dubious position among the Reformed and, without nuance and proper qualification, is easily exposed as confused. See, e.g., Francis Turretin’s discussion and critique of eternal justification in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, XVI.ix. Also see the cogent critique of this notion in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 519–20.

taken to evacuate history of significance *in order to* inflate the divine decree with a priority of importance.

Unfortunately, to speak of an “already” in relation to time and eternity and in connection with the divine decree is not properly speaking apropos, for the divine decree is not subject to temporal categories, like “already” and “to come.” God’s decree is his eternal and ever-present and active will, not merely a “whence” or a “back when”; it is his eternal will. Thus, while it is permissible to distinguish our justification as objectively pronounced in the resurrection of Christ and in the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 4:25; 2 Cor. 5:19) from our justification as subjectively appropriated in internal calling and the act of faith (as it is likewise permissible to speak of our justification as an eternal and gracious decision of God regarding his elect in time through Christ’s righteousness in the way of faith), it is not helpful to accent the eternal aspect in any manner that renders time superfluous or treats the sinner’s appropriation of Christ’s righteousness by faith as anticlimactic. Such an error has Platonic tendencies.¹⁸⁰

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

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

¹⁸⁰ It should be noted that holding to a supralapsarian position does not require an affirmation of justification from eternity. See, for example, Geerhardus Vos, *Systematische Theologie: Compendium* (Grand Rapids, 1916), 24, 98, who, though a supralapsarian, denies eternal justification. Thus concerning the question whether justification is from eternity, Vos offers a negative reply and says that while the decree concerning justification is from eternity, justification itself is not eternal. He offers specific arguments in rebuttal of eternal justification (pp. 98–99).

upon God’s providence, ordinary and extraordinary, in order to come into existence and reach their end.

In light of God’s eternal decree, in whatever sense the language of an eternal justification can be pressed into a mold that has some semblance of orthodoxy, it is not particularly helpful; nor is it according to a Scriptural pattern of speaking. At the very least, it is open to misinterpretation and threatens, potentially, the necessity of the work of Christ except that work too is eternally decreed of God to be accomplished in the temporal order. What is more, it is not even clear that the doctrine of an eternal justification is necessary. What problem is remedied by speaking of an eternal justification? From Kuyper’s own broader theological project, it is evident that he wants to make room for the justification of covenant children who depart this life as infants, such that though they never had come to any knowledge or consciousness of their justification, nonetheless they participate in God’s forgiveness and acceptance prior to this being impressed upon their consciousness or their obtaining an experience of it. Justification is not dependent upon a human appropriation of it; rather, it is a reality because God, from his holy judgment-seat, sovereignly declares his elect justified, and so it is not dependent in any way upon anything in the sinner, neither conversion, the act of faith, or spiritual rebirth.¹⁸¹ The consequence of this view, or the potential and feared consequence, was that the call to covenant obedience and the appropriation of Christ by faith would be short-changed or ignored altogether.

As for Kuyper’s oft repeated concern, within the broader context of his theology, that believing parents ought not to doubt the salvation and election of their covenant children who die in infancy, prior to their coming to a conscious act of faith and so also prior to their being conscious of their justification, we may offer an alternative remedy that surmounts the weaknesses of a doctrine of eternal justification—namely, that the children of believing parents are heirs of all the salvific blessings of the covenant of grace according to the divine promise, and therefore we need not wait for covenant children to reach maturity, and come to conscious faith, before reckoning them the recipients of God’s saving work. On the contrary, on the basis of the divine promise, believing parents may properly regard their children, especially those who die in infancy, as God’s elect and that God applies the saving work of Christ to them for eternal life (see Canons of Dort, I, art. 17).¹⁸²

3.3. *Immediate Regeneration*

The topic of immediate regeneration, like that of assumed regeneration requires more care in order to sort out in what respects Bavinck agrees with Kuyper in affirming this doctrine, and in what respects he felt obliged to distance himself from Kuyper’s emphases in order to ward

¹⁸¹ Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 463, 462 [370, 369].

¹⁸² See Cornelis P. Venema, “The Election and Salvation of the Children of Believers Who Die in Infancy: A Study of Article I/17 of the Canons of Dort,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 17 (2006): 57–100.

off potential abuses and negative propensities to which this doctrine is susceptible.

Kuyper treats the doctrine of immediate regeneration with great care. He carefully distinguishes various senses in which the word “regeneration” comes to theological definition and makes clear that an immediate regeneration has to do with the “starting point” of new life in the dead sinner—a “first grace” administered to such persons prior to an engagement of their knowledge and volition, a divine work in which they remain wholly passive. Kuyper fully affirms that subsequent to the work of quickening God engages the sinner’s knowledge and volition in the work of conversion, even as conversion involves the use of means, such as the preaching of the Word. But before believers hear and respond in faith to the gospel proclaimed, they must first be given ears to hear. Before believing sinners manifest “the acts of faith,” they must first be given the capacity for faith. Kuyper carefully notes how the work of regeneration and conversion often coincide in the case of adult converts, while regeneration and conversion can be separated by many years in the case of covenant children nurtured in the faith from infancy.

It is this aspect of Kuyper’s teaching that worried some of his contemporaries, since they feared that if regeneration (understood in the narrow sense as “quickenning”) was separated in time from conversion (a conscious act of faith and repentance), then a serious call to faith might well be undermined and a presumption of salvation would rest upon those who nonetheless fail to manifest “the acts of faith.”

Kuyper’s own worry, however, lay elsewhere. He feared that if we minimize the doctrine of immediate regeneration, then, practically speaking, covenant children who die at a tender age are abandoned to a verdict of eternal damnation, inasmuch as they cannot manifest the signs of regeneration. In short, if regeneration and conversion are forced to coincide in a temporal sense, then we must conclude that little infants and toddlers are unconverted, without faith, and so without Christ. Thus, for Kuyper, it was crucial to distinguish regeneration in the narrow sense, which is effectuated in the elect without means, from conversion, which is tied to the inward call and makes use of means. Again, Kuyper holds resolutely to the use of means in connection with the call of the gospel; and when the Holy Spirit brings a person to faith and conversion, he does this in and through the Word of the gospel.

We see, then, that Kuyper’s doctrine of immediate regeneration is most concerned to protect the status of covenant children who die at a tender age. In an age of high infant mortality this was a burning pastoral issue. For Kuyper, to soft-pedal immediate regeneration led to emphasizing regeneration as *mediated* (quickenning through the use of means), which then, inevitably, placed deceased covenant children in a spiritually dubious state, given that they already stand condemned in Adam but cannot comply with the demands of faith and repentance as the path of salvation in Christ.

Bavinck’s treatment of this doctrine manifests a different set of concerns from Kuyper. Given that Bremmer has nicely summed up Bavinck’s views on this topic, it would be redundant to repeat his work. We

do wish, however, to distinguish Bavinck’s apprehensions from Kuyper’s as they pertain to this issue. For Bavinck, like Kuyper, regeneration is not a matter of moral suaveness or congruism of some sort, nor does the Word, in itself, possess a power that can transform a heart of stone into a heart of flesh or make an unbeliever into a believer. Like Kuyper, Bavinck allows for a diverse usage of the word “regeneration,” for the careful use of terms is what the theological enterprise requires. In fact, Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s discussion, allowing for some different preferences in terminology, track quite closely with one another. Bavinck agrees entirely with Kuyper in maintaining that regeneration must precede faith and repentance and so he affirms the distinction between faith as a capacity and faith as an act.

Bavinck, however, more directly and overtly binds the blessings of regeneration to the covenant of grace and union with Christ. Moreover, in his book on *Calling and Regeneration*,¹⁸³ Bavinck shows how this doctrine, when woven into a doctrine of assumed regeneration, can muffle the call to faith, produce a preaching that fails to search the heart, as it can lead to a presumption of salvation when one is devoid the marks of a Christian and is, in fact, unsaved. But this is a possibility, not a necessity, and so his critique of this doctrine is modulated and circumspect.

Bavinck successfully shows that the locution “immediate regeneration” was not accepted by all the Reformed; he also shows how the Reformed, in their works on dogmatics, always treated regeneration under the topic of calling and regeneration, or some such heading. Never was regeneration treated independent of calling. Bavinck demonstrates, too, that the word “regeneration,” given its diverse usage, can properly be linked to calling and the use of means. If nothing else, Bavinck’s discussion is helpful in bringing out the assorted way both Scripture and Reformed writers have employed the word “regeneration.”

Once more, at root, Bavinck does not disagree with Kuyper’s treatment of this topic. But he more properly shows how theological terminology needs to be allowed some fluidity of usage in order to keep a biblical balance—in this case, preaching as a means of grace may rightly be connected with regeneration understood in a certain way. This constitutes, then, what is of principal concern for Bavinck over against Kuyper: whereas Kuyper is most concerned about what status we regard deceased covenant children, Bavinck is most concerned that we appreciate the different ways that Scripture uses the term “regeneration” and that our theology make room for this diversity of usage.

On this matter, the Conclusions of Utrecht present this judgment, which is very much in line with Bavinck’s formulations:

In regard to the third point, that of *immediate regeneration*, Synod declares

- that this expression can be used in a good sense, insofar as our churches have always confessed, over against the Lutherans and the Roman Catholic church, that regeneration is not ef-

¹⁸³ See footnote 1.

- fectured through the Word or the Sacraments as such, but through the almighty and regenerating work of the Holy Spirit;
- that this regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, however, may not in that sense be divorced from the preaching of the Word, as if both were separated from each other; for, although our Confession teaches that we need not be in doubt respecting the salvation of our children who die in infancy though they have not heard the preaching of the gospel, and our Confessional Standards nowhere express themselves as to the manner in which regeneration is effected in the case of these and other children—yet, on the other hand, it is certain that the gospel is a power of God unto salvation for every one who believes, and that in the case of adults the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit accompanies the preaching of the gospel.

Although Synod does not doubt that God is also powerfully able, even among the heathen, to regenerate those whom He wills without the preaching of the Word, yet Synod judges on the basis of God's Word

- that we can make no pronouncement regarding the question whether this actually happens, and that therefore we must adhere to the rule that the revealed Word gives to us, and leave the hidden things to the Lord our God.

Again, in light of Bavinck's stated views, we discover that the Conclusions of Utrecht address this question along the course of his thinking and mirror his sentiments. The Conclusions assert that the language of immediate regeneration can be used in a proper sense in order to distinguish the Reformed view from Roman Catholic and Lutheran errors, for the Word and sacraments do not themselves *effect* regeneration; that privilege and work is reserved to the almighty operations of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, "this regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit ... should not be in such a way divorced from the preaching of the Word as if these two were separate from each other."

It is clearly evident, therefore, that the Conclusions not only reflect Bavinck's desire to keep the means of grace connected to the work of regeneration, they also reproduce his judgment that, while believing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their covenant children who die in infancy, the timing of regeneration, whether it ordinarily takes place *before, at, or after* baptism, is not something Scripture reveals to us and so we must not assign a fixed rule to the Spirit's operations in this regard. The case of deceased covenant infants, then, ought not to compromise the clear biblical affirmation that "the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth, and that in the case of adults the regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit accompanies the preaching of the Gospel."¹⁸⁴

It is not an overstatement to assert that all Reformed writers assent to the doctrine of immediate regeneration at some fundamental level, for to deny it is to succumb to a form of Pelagianism and Remonstrant the-

¹⁸⁴ In critique of Kuyper's view, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 468–79, especially 470–72.

ology. Bavinck upholds the doctrine of immediate regeneration inasmuch as it acknowledges and safeguards God’s gracious work in bringing fallen sinners to new life and salvation—a work that God directly executes upon the sinner and fundamentally consists of a spiritual resurrection from the dead. Indeed, in dealing with the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of sinners, and in dealing with the means or instruments that the Spirit employs in order to accomplish his sovereign work, Reformed theologians have had to chart their way through a thicket of errors. On the one side is the error of undervaluing the use of means—of any kind—with the result that, in protecting God’s sovereignty in performing the work of salvation, Word and sacrament, and the church’s role in administering Word and sacrament, are denigrated and “the *means of grace*” becomes an empty title. On the other side is the error of overvaluing the use of means—the means of both Word and sacrament—with the result that divine agency in the work of salvation is transferred to means and the *means of grace* come to mean actually the *agents of grace*.

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

3.4. *Assumed Regeneration*

The difference between Kuyper and Bavinck on the issue of assumed regeneration is actually rather small, for Bavinck does not dispute that God can and does regenerate at least some elect persons from infancy, even prior to baptism, and he does not believe it is correct to doubt the regeneration of covenant children or to assume their non-regeneration. Bavinck champions the nomenclature “judgment of charity” regarding covenant children, which means that the church’s posture toward its covenant youth—from infancy to years of discretion—is one of love and trust: love toward them and trust in God that he is working out their salvation according to his sovereign mercy and infallible promise.

Bavinck, however, strongly disputed the notion that the church’s assumption regarding the divine work of grace in the lives of covenant children formed *the ground for baptism*. This is mistaken on several levels, making a human, subjective posture the basis for baptism instead of the objective promise and command of God. Moreover, given the inescapably subjective posture of this idea, human guess-work becomes the foundation for the sacrament of baptism rather than the reality that stands in back of the sign and seal of the baptismal rite.

It seems rather obvious that the weakness in Kuyper's presentation of assumed regeneration, as it stands, is that he makes a human response to the divine promise, which is necessarily subjective, *the ground* of infant baptism. In fact, the proper ground for infant baptism is principally the objective divine promise itself, along with the implicit command contained in that promise—namely, that the children of believing parents, as members of the covenant, ought to receive the sign and seal of the covenant, and ought to be baptized.¹⁸⁵ We could easily multiply both biblical and theological sources that confirm this point.¹⁸⁶ Let it suffice to say that, for the Reformed, the ground for baptism (including infant baptism), in decreasing order of importance, is typically and principally (1) the command of Christ (Matt. 28:19, 20; Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16); (2) the divine promise of the covenant of grace (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39; 10:47); (3) the analogy derived from circumcision (Col. 2:12); (4) the fact that covenant infants belong to the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:13; Luke 18:15); (5) the importance of the biblical affirmation that covenant children are holy (1 Cor. 7:14; Acts 10:47); (6) that no legitimate reason exists to prevent their baptism; and (8) that the church fathers confirm infant baptism.¹⁸⁷

However, as we saw, Kuyper's views have been caricatured in many respects. It is appropriate to observe that Kuyper sought to combat a "doubting-Christian" form of piety, wherein church members assume the worst about one another and so also about covenant children. This is a posture not of faith in God's promises but of doubt, even despair, operating with the assumption of non-regeneration, so that covenant children are presented for baptism under the assumption that they do not belong to Christ and that the Holy Spirit is not working the grace of new life in them. For Kuyper, this is a scandal—placing the signs and seals of union with Christ and the blessings of salvation upon a child whom the church in fact believes to be alienated from Christ, a stranger to the saving operations of his Spirit, and in whom death abides. Kuyper also would not accept an agnostic posture, neither denying nor affirming that God is working his grace of new life in covenant children, and then proceeding with the baptism of covenant infants in a posture of uncertainty. For Kuyper, both assumed non-regeneration and the agnostic posture fail to take God at his Word; both views proceed to baptize covenant children in unbelief.

Kuyper also wanted to combat the nominal Christianity that characterized the national church idea. This notion was empty any genuine piety and proceeded to baptize covenant children out of custom or superstition.

¹⁸⁵ Hence the language of the Form for Baptism used by most Reformed churches in the Dutch tradition: "... [covenant] children should be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant"

¹⁸⁶ For example, the Belgic Confession, art. 34, where we confess the following: "We believe our children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as little children were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises made to our children"; also Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 74; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 637–40.

¹⁸⁷ Such is the order of presentation as set forth by Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, XIX.xii.2–11.

In any case, given his polemical interests, or perhaps because of his polemical interests, Kuyper was blind to a weakness in his presentation, making as he did a subjective posture *the ground* for infant baptism. But we may ask, was it really his intention to make the baptism of covenant infants rest on the *single* ground of a human assumption or presupposition? In fact, when his writings were shown to imply or require that teaching, he offered a correction and clarification to his view. When formally addressing the question, then, Kuyper is very rounded and fulsome in his understanding of the *grounds* for infant baptism. Believing parents have the right to request that their children receive the sacrament of baptism on the ground of the divine promise extended to believing parents and to their seed in the covenant of grace, and the church, on the same basis or ground, has the right and duty to administer the sacrament accordingly. However, looking for a deeper basis upon which the baptism of covenant children rests, Kuyper points out that the covenant of grace itself is grounded upon God's own sovereign good pleasure, and so the promise of grace in the covenant of grace is founded on God himself. If, however, we ask about the connection between the sign and seal of baptism and the spiritual reality signified and sealed therein, then naturally the spiritual reality is regeneration itself, quickening and all that inevitably flows from it.

Thus Kuyper is willing to speak of the ground of infant baptism from four distinct angles. God's promise and command, contained in the covenant of grace, form the ground for baptism in two such cases. The divine good pleasure is the deepest and most inscrutable ground; and the ground of an "assumed regeneration" applies to what Reformed theologians called "the sacramental union," i.e., the connection between the sign and the thing signified. For Kuyper, yes, an assumed or presupposed regeneration is the only right disposition to take in considering what is pictured and promised in baptism and all of that in union with the reality of Christ and his saving benefits applied to the recipients of the divine promise.

Bavinck, however, has another set of concerns regarding this doctrine. From the point of view of historical development, Bavinck demonstrates that there was never a single Reformed statement of this topic or a definitive declaration upon which all the Reformed agreed. Bavinck's textured presentation of the various ways the Reformed sought to relate covenant and election, as well as the manner in which the promise of the covenant of grace came to salvific reality among the covenanted, i.e., the baptized, shows that the church cannot make an infallible pronouncement in this regard. We cannot know more than what God has chosen to reveal to us and he has not revealed that all persons who are baptized are thereby saved, nor has God revealed to us who among baptized infants, prior to reaching years of discretion, will certainly be shown to be saved. Because some baptized persons in fact finally and definitively show themselves not to be saved, an assumed regeneration may not form the ground for baptism. However, for Bavinck, it is proper to regard covenant children as already and ordinarily regenerated prior to baptism; and he takes the words of the Form for Baptism, "sanctified in Christ," to

teach that very thing, though he does not think 1 Corinthians 7:14 supports this teaching or is relevant to the question. He appeals to other texts as supporting this doctrine, which keeps the import of baptism intact and which allows us to exercise a judgment of charity: regarding covenant children to be in Christ and regenerated until the contrary is manifest. Bavinck's stated view does this without pressing beyond the dictates of Scripture, as if we could speak a definitive and infallible word about all who are candidates for baptism. Bavinck even sets forth the pedagogical value of treating covenant youth under this judgment of charity.

Regarding the doctrine of an assumed regeneration, the Conclusions of Utrecht, like in that Synod's previous pronouncements, travel along Bavinck's theological highway. The criticism directed at Kuyper's doctrine of an assumed regeneration, which forms the ground for the baptism of covenant infants, is restrained, i.e., it is regarded as "less correct":

Finally, regarding the fourth point, that of *assumed regeneration (onderstelde wedergeboorte)*, Synod declares

- that, according to the Confession of our churches, the seed of the covenant must, in virtue of the promise of God, be regarded as regenerated and sanctified in Christ, until, as they grow up, the contrary is evident from their life or doctrine;
- that, however, it is less correct to say that baptism is administered to believers' children on the ground of their assumed (*onderstelde*) regeneration, for the ground of baptism is the command and promise of God;
- that, furthermore, the judgment of charity, whereby the church regards the seed of the covenant as regenerated, does not therefore in any way imply that every child is truly regenerated, since God's Word teaches us that not all are Israel who are from Israel, and regarding Isaac it is said: "in him shall your seed be named" (Romans 9:6, 7), so that in preaching, serious self-examination shall be urged continually, inasmuch as only those who believe and are baptized shall be saved.

Furthermore Synod maintains, together with our Confession,

- that the sacraments "are not empty and hollow signs to deceive us," but "are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit" (Article 33), and that in particular baptism is called "the washing of regeneration" and "the washing away of sins" because God wants "to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are as truly cleansed from our sins spiritually as we are physically washed with water"; for which reason, in the prayer after baptism, our church thanks and praises God that He has forgiven us and our children all our sins, through the blood of His beloved Son Jesus Christ, and received us through His Holy Spirit to be His children, and sealed and confirmed this to us by holy baptism; so that our Confessional standards clearly teach that the sacrament of baptism signifies and seals the washing away of sins by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ, that is, justification and renewal by

the Holy Spirit as benefits that God has bestowed upon our seed.

Meanwhile Synod is of the opinion that the representation that every elect child is therefore already in fact regenerated before being baptized, cannot be proved either on the basis of Scripture or on the basis of the Confession, since God sovereignly fulfills His promise in His own time, whether before, during, or after baptism, so that one is required to exercise caution in this regard and not want to be wise above what God has revealed to us.

The Conclusions of Utrecht reply to the Kuyperian doctrine of assumed regeneration by saying that while it is correct to view the seed of the covenant as regenerated and sanctified in Christ, until they demonstrate the contrary, it is “less correct to say that baptism is administered to the children of believers on the ground of their assumed (*onderstelde*) regeneration, for the ground of baptism is the command and promise of God.” This assessment, again, follows the traits and features of Bavinck’s formulations. What is striking, and must not be missed, is that believing parents are not to view their children as lost and without Christ until they give clear proof to the contrary. Rather, believing parents, exercising a judgment of charity and trusting in God’s promise and the sovereign operations of the Holy Spirit, should regard their children as “regenerated and sanctified in Christ.”

This is not to make a definitive and infallible “ontic claim” about such children, but it is a posture of faith in the divine promise. It also fits with the Reformed understanding of the sacrament of baptism, which on the one hand does not view baptism itself to effect salvation in the baptized (as in a doctrine of baptismal regeneration), but which on the other hand does not think that what is signified and sealed to baptized persons is a deception—a promise with crossed-fingers, “empty and hollow signs to deceive us.” To be sure, the promises of salvation are always in the way of faith, never in the way of unbelief. But God’s merciful and salvific work does not have to wait until a covenant child reaches years of discretion, obtaining the faith of such discretionary years, before those promises can take effect for their redemption. For faith does not make God’s grace effective; rather, faith is itself an effect of God’s saving operations. Indeed, regeneration in the sense of quickening precedes faith; and faith is a gift of God. In the case of covenant children who die at a tender age, prior to reaching years of discretion, believing parents and the church are not to doubt the election and salvation of such children—not because they can, like God, make an infallible judgment about those children, but because they can believe in God’s promises, which are certain and infallible—the very promises that are revealed in his Word. A faith that doubts and does not trust in God’s promises can hardly be counted as normative; in fact, such faith actually calls into question God’s Word of promise and in effect denies the very thing that the sacraments are designed to confirm: the “Yes” and “Amen” of the gospel.

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From our analysis offered above, we observe that under each of the disputed points under discussion, Bavinck's formulations, more so than Kuyper's, form the content of the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905. It is not so much that Kuyper's views are crushed, but at points they are cast under a shadow, for if nothing else they require words of warning, such that the Synod of Utrecht 1905 felt compelled to urge pastors and church members to "adhere to the presentation given in our Confessional standards," to remind the church that faith is required "to be justified before the righteousness of God," to admonish that "this regenerating work of the Holy Spirit ... may not ... be divorced from the preaching of the Word," and to warn that it is "less correct," even if permitted, to say that baptism is administered to covenant children on the ground of an assumed regeneration.

Certainly a case could be made that Bavinck's work simply reflects the rich heritage that is the Reformed tradition. As a brilliant and well-informed student of that tradition, he served the church well by bringing a well-rounded knowledge to the issues in discussion; and as a son of the *Afscheiding*, who nonetheless supported Kuyper in his broad "worldview" project, he spoke as one who had his feet in both worlds of the recently formed *De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN).