

## Election and the universal offer of Salvation

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In his book *Prediking en Uitverkiezing* [Preaching and Election]<sup>1</sup> Cornelis Veenhof<sup>2</sup> gives an overview of the discussions about the function of the doctrine of election in the preaching of the gospel within the churches that stem from the Secession [Afscheiding] of 1834. The Afscheiding can be seen as a result of a revival of orthodox Reformed faith within a church that slowly but surely became under the influence of enlightenment culture, which can be typified with the Kantian phrase: 'du kannst denn du Sollst' [you can, because you must]. To the orthodox Reformed tradition this phrase turned the Augustinian thought that God himself gives what he demands upside down.

One aspect of the debates that Veenhof describes is about the apparent conflict between the general proclamation of the promise of the gospel<sup>3</sup> and the fact that the atonement is effective only for the elect.<sup>4</sup> In what way is the preacher allowed to offer salvation to his congregation? Veenhof discusses three interpretations of this general offer.<sup>5</sup> First, because it is not clear in whom the Holy Spirit works faith, the general offer can consist only in the report of some general truths concerning Christ life, death and resurrection (F.A. Kok).<sup>6</sup> Second, salvation can be offered to all, but not without the condition of faith and repentance (S. van Velsen).<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, the proclamation of the gospel itself is of sacramental character (Veenhof's own interpretation of John Calvin).<sup>8</sup>

Herman Bavinck was himself a child of the *Afscheiding*. His father, Jan Bavinck, was a teacher at the Kampen seminary of the separated churches. It is evident from the *Reformed Dogmatics* that Bavinck was aware of the problem.

The scriptures leave no doubt that the gospel may and must be preached to all creatures. Whether or not we can square this with a particular outcome is another question.<sup>9</sup>

This is indeed the question I would like to pose. How does Bavinck reconcile the general offer of salvation with its particular outcome? How is this offer to be understood according to Bavinck? This question is dealt with in different *loci* in the *Reformed Dogmatics*.

- 1) In the doctrine of God: Bavinck's view on the theory of the twofold will of God.<sup>10</sup>
- 2) In the doctrine of the counsel of God: Bavinck's view on the origin of faith.<sup>11</sup>
- 3) In the doctrine of the work of Christ: Bavinck's view on particular satisfaction.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. Veenhof (1959), *Prediking en Uitverkiezing: Kort overzicht van de strijd gevoerd in de christelijke afgescheidene gereformeerde kerk tussen 1850 en 1870 over de plaats van de leer der uitverkiezing in de prediking*. Kampen: Kok.

<sup>2</sup> Veenhof taught homiletics at the seminary of the Free Reformed Churches at Kampen (Broederweg).

<sup>3</sup> Canons of Dordt II-4.

<sup>4</sup> Canons of Dordt II-3.

<sup>5</sup> Chapter III: 'Debate over the benevolent offer' [welmeenende aanbieding].

<sup>6</sup> Veenhof, *Prediking*, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> Veenhof, *Prediking*, p. 54-56.

<sup>8</sup> Veenhof, *Prediking*, p. 56.

<sup>9</sup> H. Bavinck (1928-30), *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*<sup>4</sup>. J.H. Kok:Kampen. IV, § 39, 434, p. 4. (From now on abbreviated as *GD*). / (2002-2008), *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. IV, 434, p. 36 (from now on abbreviated as *RD*).

<sup>10</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup>, II § 30C, 208-9, pp. 202-215 / *RD* II, 208-9, pp. 233-245.

<sup>11</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup>, II § 32, 241-4 pp. 336-350 / *RD* II, 241-4, pp. 374-388.

#### 4) In the doctrine of vocation: Bavinck's view on internal and external vocation.<sup>13</sup>

By an analysis of these paragraphs I hope to present Bavinck's solution to the problem. Then I would like to place this against the background of the discussion as described by Veenhof. What line does Bavinck take in this debate? I would like to conclude the paper by reflecting on the implications of Bavinck's view for the mission and evangelization of the Reformed churches today especially in the Dutch context.

#### *The will of God*

Bavinck discusses his views on the will of God in the context of the attributes of divine sovereignty, more specifically the doctrine of omnipotence. Bavinck identifies the will of God as the eternal ground of everything that exists.<sup>14</sup> In order to understand what the scriptural passages like 1 Tim. 2:4 mean, where Paul states that God 'will have all men to be saved' (KJV), it is important to distinguish between different meanings of the will of God. God does not will everything in the same way. In that way, no creational diversity is possible. For Bavinck, God's affection is different towards his creation, the church, and Christ. But the will of God is exceptionally difficult to understand in relation to evil. Evil cannot be in the same relation to the will of God as the good. Because of this variety of God's willing, a distinction between God's commanding will [*voluntas signi*], and God's deciding will [*voluntas beneplaciti*] is in order. This distinction was, according to Bavinck, interpreted by Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Remonstrants, that God's antecedent will [*voluntas antecedens*] was God's actual will, and God's consequent will [*voluntas consequens*] denotes only God's decision as it was prompted by human (un)faithful behavior. God's antecedent will means that God wills all men to be saved, and God's consequent will means that he accepts the believer and rejects the unbeliever. The Reformed, however, started with God's *voluntas beneplaciti*. This will of God is the actual will, that always achieves its goal. It is eternal, immutable and efficacious. The commanding will, though, is an expression of God's general prescription, in the law and the gospel, but this prescript of itself does not achieve anything. Bavinck criticizes Pelagian solutions to this problem because the will of God is thought of as an 'unfulfilled wish'.<sup>15</sup> The outcome of world history becomes an eternal disappointment for God. Furthermore, Bavinck denies the claim that the commanding and deciding will are contradictory. The commanding will states not what God will do, but what God wants *us* to do.<sup>16</sup> For Bavinck, this general rule can only metaphorically be called will of God. Bavinck stresses that the *voluntas beneplaciti* is good and holy as well. Both need to be acknowledged. The *voluntas signi* must be upheld because of God's holiness, and the *voluntas beneplaciti* because of God's sovereignty. Bavinck's rejection of Pelagian solutions becomes apparent here. The human will is not independent from the eternal immutable decree of God. Everything in the world is ultimately grounded in the good, holy, and efficacious will of God. The universal texts like 1 Tim. 2:4 point to a general rule that can only be called will of God metaphorically, as an expression of the *voluntas signi*.

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<sup>12</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> III, §47, 404-7, pp. 450-470 / *RD* III, 404-7, pp. 455-473.

<sup>13</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> IV, §49, 433-6, pp. 1-16 / *RD* IV, 433-6, pp. 33-46.

<sup>14</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> II, §30, 207, p. 198 / *RD* II, 207, p.229: 'Always and everywhere his will decides'.

<sup>15</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> II, §30, 209, p. 213 / *RD* II, 209, p. 244.

<sup>16</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> II, §30, 209, p. 214 / *RD* II, 209, p. 244.

## Election

This anti-Pelagian standpoint of Bavinck is most notably developed in the section about the counsel of God, that forms the transition from the doctrine of God to his works. Bavinck starts out by distinguishing between God's immanent works of the eternal essence, and the external works of creation and recreation. He defines the counsel of God as follows:

The counsel of God is to be understood as his eternal plan [besluit] for all that exists or will happen in time.<sup>17</sup>

God's decree is an internal act, immanent in the divine essence. It is eternal, which does not mean that it precedes time, for that would presuppose another temporal order. God's decree is above and outside time. Furthermore, the decree must not be understood as a plan that lies waiting for its execution. God is eternal actuality, and cannot be thought of as being indecisive.

Content and object of God's counsel is the world idea.<sup>18</sup> This world idea must be distinguished from God's essence. The world-idea is God's way to express the glory of his essence in creation. Bavinck uses the distinction between *scientia simplicis intelligentiae* and *scientia visionis* to explain that God's self-knowledge exceeds his knowledge of the world as it was, is and will come to be. The world-idea is the divine blue-print of the world. This world-idea is both *causa exemplaris*, because all being is a shadow of God's thought [een afschaduwung van het gedachte]<sup>19</sup> and *causa efficiens* of all being, because everything comes into being through and by the will of God.<sup>20</sup> The next point is that the counsel of God is one. Although it is one, it manifests itself in a richness and variety of things and events. There are, however, distinctions to be made. The divine decision that is generally indicated as providence is the first part of the counsel of God. This contains the question about the eternal state of rational creatures (predestination or special providence) and the ordering and arranging of all things (general providence). A modern element of Bavinck's discussion is that he distinguishes between a natural and a moral world which are both the object of the counsel of God. This means that human freedom (the moral world) is also governed by the counsel of God. Human freedom is never freedom from God's counsel. This idea would lead to a Pelagian conception of free will. But, God and man must not be thought of as competitors. The solution to this problem must be sought in the idea that God's knowledge and will do not destroy human freedom, but create it and maintain it.<sup>21</sup>

For Bavinck, predestination cannot be limited by a reduction to foreknowledge. To state that God only has foreknowledge and does not predestinate is a contradiction in terms.

Bavinck does admit that predestination, as a part of the confession of most of the Christian churches, is understood as mere foreknowledge. Nevertheless, he believes that this reduced

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<sup>17</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> II, §32, 240, p. 333 / *RD* II, 240, p. 372.

<sup>18</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> II, §32, 240, p. 334 / *RD* II, 240, p.373. The English translation is a bit too loose. *Besluit* and *wereldidee* are both translated by plan. Decision must be associated with God's will and idea with his knowledge (*scientia visionis*). Cf. R.H. Bremmer (1961), *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*. Kampen: Kok, p. 198-199.

<sup>19</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> II, §32, 240, p. 335 / *RD* II, 240, p. 375. The English translation renders: 'all existing things are a reproduction of the plan of God'.

<sup>20</sup> This is strong evidence for Bavinck's intellectualist approach in the doctrine of God.

<sup>21</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> II, §32, 241, p. 338 / *RD* II, 241, p. 377.

understanding of predestination is contradicted by scripture, experience and theological thinking. With regard to the last point Bavinck states that when the object is purely coincidental, foreknowledge cannot be maintained. Foreknowledge can only be intelligible with reference to the eternal and immutable decree of God. Bavinck presents us with an either/or. Either one accepts predestination in an Augustinian fashion, and foreknowledge can be maintained, or one accepts independent freedom of man, but then God's foreknowledge must be rejected. The Christian church, however, never dared to deny God's foreknowledge. Bavinck deduces from this, that predestination is the dogma of the complete Christian church.

Bavinck teaches a double predestination, which entails both election and reprobation. For Bavinck the decision concerning the eternal state of man is grounded in the will of God that is, as we have already seen, efficacious. Bavinck renounces the idea that God's counsel is conditional. Man is not elected on the basis of foreseen faith, but God's election is the ultimate ground of faith. For Bavinck, this leads to an eschatological division of humanity. Nevertheless, Bavinck warns us to interpret this as a dualism in time. It is not true that the reprobate only meet punishment and the elect only grace and blessing. In fact, the elect encounter temporary reprobation as well, and the reprobate do also share in the blessings of God.

They receive many natural gifts -life, health, strength, food, drink, good cheer, and so forth.<sup>22</sup>

Bavinck is eager to break through the dualistic picture.

Election and reprobation are based on God's sovereignty. Because of the fact that grace is the foundation of faith, there is hope for everyone. Election serves to invite everyone to the richness of God's grace. Reprobation, on the other hand, does not detract anything from the value of this grace

No one has a *right* to believe that he or she is a reprobate, for everyone is sincerely and urgently called to believe in Christ with a view to salvation. No one *can* actually believe it, for one's own life and all that makes it enjoyable is proof that God takes no delight in his death. No one *really* believes it, for that would be hell on earth.<sup>23</sup>

### *Particular satisfaction*

Now that Bavinck has identified the efficacious will as the actual will of God and has asserted that predestination eternally divides human kind by election and reprobation, this must lead to a particular understanding of the benefits of Christ's work. Indeed, Bavinck claims that Christ has died only for the elect.

Bavinck begins his discussion of limited atonement with a dogmahistorical overview.

Although it is true that the work of Christ is of infinite value and that it extends to the whole world, Origen concluded from this that Christ redeemed the whole world. But this sort of universalism has been rejected by all Christian churches. Augustine was the first to teach a particular satisfaction in his struggle with the Pelagians. If it is true that the eternal state of man is determined through the elective grace of God, then it is impossible to assert that Christ has redeemed every single human individual. That caused Augustine to interpret the

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<sup>22</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> II, §32, 247, p. 360 / *RD* II, 247, p. 498.

<sup>23</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> II, §32, 249, p. 366 / *RD* II, 248, p. 402.

'universalist' passages in a different way. For Augustine, It cannot be that God wills what does not come to pass. But in due time, this Augustinian position was lost and replaced by a semi-Pelagian standpoint that God antecedently willed the redemption of all, and willed consequently whatever man in his freedom chose to do with this offer of grace. In this way, the satisfaction and election of man is made dependent on the free will of man, and is therefore conditionalized.

The Reformed, however, held on to the Augustinian particular satisfaction but they stood alone. On top of this, there was also division in the Reformed churches over the correct rendering of this doctrine. Was it possible to say that the death of Christ was sufficient for the sins of the whole world but not efficient? Some denied this possibility and asserted that if Christ death was not efficient for the whole world, it could not be sufficient either.<sup>24</sup>

Others asserted that although Christ died effectively for the elect only, he died sufficiently for the sins of the whole world.

After Bavinck's depiction of the history of doctrine that I have succinctly portrayed, Bavinck notes that there are two main agreements between the universalists and the particularists. First, they both accept the fact that not all men actually receive the benefits of the work of Christ. Second, both accept the fact that the death of Christ is of infinite value, and sufficient, not only for a few, but for all men. Bavinck concludes from this observation that even the universalists accept a particular outcome. To them some actually do perish in unbelief. The disagreement between the two parties resides in the question whether it was God's will and intention that the death of Christ was only for those who were given to him by the father. For Bavinck it is clear that in the New Testament only the community of believers profit from the death of Christ.

According to Bavinck, the scriptural passages that the universalists rely on cannot support the cause, because in that case, they would support Origen's theory of the *apokatastasis pantoon*. Other passages with a universal scope are in complete harmony with the notion of particular satisfaction. The gospel must be preached to all creatures. There is no need to be frugal in sharing the gospel.

Scripture is not afraid that *too* many people will be saved.<sup>25</sup>

This means that the preaching of the gospel is of the utmost importance. Particular satisfaction does not constrain the command of Jesus to preach the gospel to all people. For Bavinck it is clear that many people will be saved. Yet, many does not mean all, and the word 'all' in the universalist passages should be related to the *voluntas signi* and not the *voluntas beneplaciti*.

Second, Bavinck criticizes the universalists, because they diminish the value and the power of the work of Christ. For when they want to avoid the position of Origen they have to drive a wedge between the acquirement of salvation and its application. For salvation is acquired for all but applied only to those that accept the gracious offer of God.<sup>26</sup> The result of this move is that Christ did gain certain salvation for no one, because it depends on the free will of man. Christ only ascertained the possibility of salvation, but not actual salvation. In this way, Christ only obtained the possibility for God to forgive us. The centre of gravity lies in

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<sup>24</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> III, §47, 405, p. 456 / *RD* III, 405, p. 461.

<sup>25</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> III, §47, 406, p. 461 / *RD* III, 405, p. 465.

<sup>26</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> III, §47, 406, p. 464 / *RD* III, 406, p. 468.

the decision of man to accept or reject the offer of grace. God is dependent on this decision. Bavinck concludes:

The universalists tend, therefore, to diminish the value and power of Christ's work. What they gain in quantity –and then only seemingly- they lose in quality.<sup>27</sup>

Third, Bavinck states that universalism leads to all sorts of false assertions. When for instance the doctrine of universal satisfaction is explained in a Trinitarian fashion, this becomes clear. For the Father wills all men to be saved, the work of the Son provides universal satisfaction, but the Holy Spirit applies this universal satisfaction particularly. This leads to an inner-Trinitarian conflict. Furthermore, if Christ has died for all, then everyone must be given the opportunity to accept or reject the offer of grace. Factually this is not the case. Vast amounts of people never heard of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Given these objections, the doctrine of universal satisfaction cannot be correct for Bavinck. He acknowledges the Reformed tradition in its doctrine of particular satisfaction. Nevertheless, this idea of particular satisfaction does not mean that the death of Christ has no significance for those who perish in unbelief. It is typical of Bavinck that he tries to show that the work of Christ is also of significance for the reprobate. For Bavinck, it is not true that Christ has gained everything for the elect and nothing for the reprobate. He mentions a whole list of things that even the reprobate benefit from.

Also as the Christ, he gives to unbelievers many benefits: the call of the gospel, the warning to repent, historical faith, a virtuous life, a variety of gifts and powers, offices and ministries within the church, such as for example, even the office of an apostle in the case of Judas. "Without Jesus Christ the World would not exist, for it would necessarily either be destroyed or be a hell" (Pascal).<sup>28</sup>

Here is a good example of Bavinck's style of theology. It almost never strays into polemics. He does not depict the opposite position of universalists and particularists as pure antithetical positions. From the above quotation it is clear that Bavinck searches for the relative truth of the universalist approach. The death of Christ although only effective for the elect is still of some significance for the reprobate.

### *Twofold vocation*

The last part of the Reformed dogmatics that is of special importance to the question of this paper is the section where Bavinck treats the theme of vocation (and rebirth). The first distinction that Bavinck introduces is that between *vocatio realis* and *verbalis*. God's vocation comes to us through nature, history etc. This is the *vocatio realis* that has the law as its means. This vocation is insufficient for salvation, because it does not tell us anything about Christ and his grace. Nevertheless, the *vocatio realis* is a preparation for the gospel that comes to us in history. On the other hand, the *vocatio verbalis* has the gospel as its means. The gospel is universal in the sense that it must be preached to all people. Bavinck makes it very clear that this is an instruction of Jesus himself (Matth. 28:19). At this point Bavinck introduces the Arminian and Lutheran objection that the Reformed

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<sup>27</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> III, §47, 406, p. 464 / *RD* III, 406, p. 468.

<sup>28</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> III, §47, 407, p. 468 / *RD* III, 407, p. 471.

cannot accept such a universal call through the gospel. According to their position, after all, Christ did not die for all, but only for the elect. Their message cannot be, "Christ has made satisfaction for you; your sins have been atoned; only believe." For the unconverted the message can only consist in the demand of the law. If they maintain the universal offer of grace, it cannot be sincerely meant on the part of God.<sup>29</sup>

Bavinck adds to this that these objections are very serious. He again lists the various Reformed responses that were prompted by these objections. First, according to Bavinck, despite the variety of the responses, the Reformed have generally maintained the universal offer of grace. Only the revealed will of God can be a rule for our behavior. Christ has given us the command to preach the gospel to all. How this can be harmonized with particular satisfaction is a question for God to answer. We do not have anything to do with the decision to predestine, but we have to follow the command of Christ. The gospel is preached to sinners, not to elect or reprobate.

Second, the content of the gospel cannot be that Christ has died for all men as we have seen in the previous section. Although the universalists claim that we can do just that, they too must limit the application of satisfaction. Even for the universalist faith is a prerequisite for salvation. For them the preaching of the gospel consists in the message: belief in Jesus Christ and you will be saved. But that is not different from the perspective of the Reformed. The Reformed, however, add to this that Christ has acquired not only the possibility of salvation, but salvation in its fullness, in its application as well.

The error here is solely that humans are always inclined to reverse the God-appointed order. They want to be sure of the outcome before using the means and in order to be exempt from using the means. But it is the will of God that we shall take the way of faith, and then he unfailingly assures us of complete salvation in Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Third, this offer of grace is serious and sincere because in this way we learn what God wants us to do (*voluntas signi*). Bavinck reminds his reader that the course of history lies firm in the eternal and immutable counsel of God. This is as he has stated so boldly the doctrine of the entire Christian church. The difference between the Reformed and other Christian perspectives lies in the fact that the former hold that the *voluntas beneplaciti* lies God's actual will and intent.

Fourth, Bavinck counters the objection that the preaching of the gospel to all is useless. If God's antecedent will to save all men is posited, then his will truly becomes idle. There are only a few who respond positively to the preaching of the gospel. When the range of the vocation is extended, its quality diminishes too.

Fifth, Bavinck repeats his point that the significance of the vocation to grace is of significance for those who disregard it. This *vocatio verbalis* is a sign of God's infinite love, it shows that God does not enjoy the death of the sinner.

Sixth, the external calling of the gospel as an act of God is never idle. But its goal is not in the first place the salvation of man but the glory of his own name. For Bavinck vocation means the preaching of the claim of God on his fallen creation. We belong to God, and herein lies our true freedom. Our freedom does not lie in sin, because that demotes us from being a son to being a slave.

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<sup>29</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> IV, §49, 433, p. 3-4 / *RD* IV, 433, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> IV, §49, 434, p. 5 / *RD* IV, 434, p. 37.

After mentioning some other characteristics of the *vocation externa*, Bavinck moves on to the problem how this external vocation can lead to such different results. He discusses three different proposals for the solution of this problem. The first is the Pelagian option in which the human will is free to answer the call of grace. In this case there can be no distinction between internal and external vocation. Only that call is efficacious which is answered with a positive response. Bavinck points out that the problem is that the human sinful will itself is the cause of unbelief. But, as Bavinck has argued earlier, the doctrine of the entire Christian church is that faith and salvation can only be attributed to God's grace alone.

The second proposal that Bavinck mentions stems from Bellarmine who tried to develop a middle way between Augustine and Pelagius. The efficacy of the vocation is dependent on whether the will of man was inclined to follow it. The problem with this solution is that it does not explain how the vocation is efficacious. The centre of gravity is situated in the human will. Furthermore, this solution suggests that there are times the will is inclined and not inclined to follow the vocation. In that way, sin is placed in the circumstances.

The Augustinians, Thomists, and Reformed therefore have sought the explanation of the problem in the direction of the quality of the vocation itself. The Reformed introduced a distinction between internal and external vocation, that with regard to content can be found in the work of Augustine and Calvin. The distinction is based on the fact that the nature of man is universally corrupted. There is no man that is more apt to accept God's offer than another. Next to this point, Bavinck asserts that the mere preaching of the word is not enough to explain the fact that some react positively towards the gospel and some do not. It must therefore be that God himself works conversion and rebirth in the heart. The work of the spirit concerning the internal vocation is the actualization of election. Thirdly, Bavinck argues that in the Bible the work of redemption is ascribed completely, both subjectively and objectively, to God. This work is called rebirth. Although this distinction between *vocatio interna* and *externa* cannot be found in scripture as such, it is nevertheless implied by it.

### *Evaluation and Conclusion*

On the one hand, there is no doubt about the question whether Bavinck affirms the general offer of grace. According to Bavinck, the Holy Scripture is clear about that (Math 28:19). On the other hand Bavinck is a proponent of particular satisfaction. How does he reconcile these two statements? When we presuppose that both of the statements are true, how can this offer be sincerely meant by God? Bavinck has used a couple of scholastic distinctions to elucidate this problem. First, the general will of God is a prescript by which he reveals to us what we should do. We should believe! The particular will is the efficacious will, that always achieves its goal. If God wills that we believe, we will. Second, Logically, God's predestination precedes his foreknowledge. God does not elect on the basis of foreseen faith. The ground of our faith is ultimately found in the decision of God's saving will. Third, this results in particular satisfaction. Although Christ's work is sufficient for the sins of all men, it is only efficient for the elect. Both extreme and moderate universalism are rejected by Bavinck. The first is rejected because of the disconnection of faith and salvation, the second because it makes the application of grace dependent on the free decision of the human will. On top of that, moderate universalism is only seemingly universal. For those who do not use the possibility of grace acquired by Christ's atonement do perish in unbelief.

Fourth, Bavinck uses the distinction between internal and external calling. Only the internal calling is efficacious and the external is not. Not all respond positively towards the call of the

gospel. The internal work of the spirit must be added to explain why someone accepts the offer of grace. The Spirit does this work with the word (*cum verbo*). Veenhof, however, seems to embrace the contrary position of the Lutheran *per verbum*. The difficulty of this approach is that it cannot explain how people can remain unbelievers while hearing the word. Bavinck does not deny that the word is the prime sacrament, he even says that the word of God is 'never just a sound but a power, not mere information, but an accomplishment of his will'.<sup>31</sup> Though the word is always powerful and accompanied by the Holy spirit it does not always have the same effect. Sometimes it builds up, sometimes it strikes down. Because the preaching of the gospel is not always efficacious with respect to faith and conversion, the Reformed have 'always associated this word with its author, Christ, who administers it by the Holy Spirit'.<sup>32</sup> For Bavinck, the internal work of the Spirit must be added to the word in order to explain faith and conversion. Bavinck seems to be on the track of S. van Velsen, who held that salvation can be offered to all given the condition of faith. Nevertheless, Bavinck does not claim to have solved the tension. How God's universal offer and its particular outcome can be reconciled is beyond human understanding. He admonishes his readers to stick to God's revealed will. Jesus commands us to preach the gospel to all people. The offer of grace, however, must be accompanied by the condition of grace. But, those who are converted have only God to thank for this (1 Cor. 4:7). How this can be reconciled is a problem for God to solve, as Bavinck states. Indeed, a tension surfaces in Bavinck's theology here. He reminds us to stick to God's revealed will, although God's actual will is a hidden will. And in this will our salvation is grounded.

Although Bavinck paints a traditional Reformed picture here, there are some striking features of his presentation. The first important point I would like to stress, is that Bavinck repeatedly argues the universal significance of Christ's work in time, for both the elect and the reprobate. He does this on the basis of both the doctrine of creation and general grace. The fact that we are born should be a sign that God does not wish our downfall. Next to this, the reprobate do receive blessings and gifts, food, clothing, capabilities, etc. Thus, the paths of election and reprobation are crossing in time.

The second point is that election serves to invite people to the Christian faith. There is room in the church for anyone. In the scheme of Pelagianism there is no room for the not-morally excellent. Because of God's gracious gift of faith and conversion it is possible for all to be saved, even the most grave sinner. Jesus came to seek the lost, not the righteous. That is why the Reformed doctrine of election is of great significance for the mission of the church. The third point that I would like to underscore is Bavinck's statement that many will be saved. The idea of particular satisfaction does not limit the outward call of the gospel, because of a fear that heaven will be crowded.

### *The current mission of the church*

What does Bavinck have to tell us regarding the current mission of the church? How should we proceed? There are two things I would like to bring to attention. First, Bavinck has addressed a conference on evangelization where he spoke about the necessity of

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<sup>31</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> IV, §56, 520, p. 429 / *RD* IV, 520, p. 449.

<sup>32</sup> *GD*<sup>4</sup> IV, §56, 522, p. 440 / *RD* IV, 522, p. 459.

evangelism.<sup>33</sup> In this lecture, Bavinck develops a distinction between mission and evangelism. He uses the former concept to indicate that there is a task of the Christian church to proclaim the gospel to those *in the church* that have become estranged from the gospel (Inner mission).<sup>34</sup> One can understand why this was so important to Bavinck, because in 1909 almost 90 percent of the people in the Netherlands, were part of a Christian church (Catholic and Protestant). He already saw that the modern worldview had estranged many from the gospel of Jesus Christ, although they formally still belonged to the church. It is a little strange too see how Bavinck is shocked by the numbers of apostates in 1913, given the fact that nowadays there are no more than three million members of a Christian community in the Netherlands. Which is less than 20 percent of the total population. Bavinck's focus on the inner mission of the church is apparent from this quote:

Such a restored church— on the basis of the confession-, has first and foremost as its task to prevent that there arises a need of evangelization in the church itself. When evangelization becomes necessary, the church already fell short of this task.<sup>35</sup>

For Bavinck, the confessional church must be a beacon of light and truth for the surrounding society, not in order to distance ourselves from the society but to be a reforming power for it in commerce, science and art. Because the gospel was a free gift to us, we must give it freely to others. But we also have to make sure that we have truly received before we pass on, 'because only that testimony is powerful, that stems from faith'.<sup>36</sup> This task of inner mission, however, has to count with adversity. Bavinck warns his audience that the divide between the church and the world will always remain. The duality remains until after the end of time. For this reason it is easy to begin with the enthusiasm of the moment, but it is very difficult to continue and to persevere. Just like Karl Barth warned the newly founded *World Council of Churches* in Amsterdam (1948) that the unification of the church was too big a problem for humans too fix, Bavinck here warns the workers in the church that the divide between church and world will not be overcome in time.<sup>37</sup> That we know this, will help us to persevere in mission because we will not be disillusioned by extreme expectations. Our mission will not change the fact of this eternal division. We must be prepared to encounter difficulties and persevering unbelief. That should not dampen our spirits. It will help to endure in our struggle to believe and to be obedient to the task given to us by Christ. Bavinck concludes his lecture with an encouragement.

Therefore, it is time to start working, or rather, to continue to work better and more powerful. But we will not do this unless in the name of Him, who came not to be served, but to serve and give his soul as a ration for many.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> H. Bavinck, (1913) 'Het begrip en de noodzaak der evangelisatie' in: *Handelingen van het congres voor gereformeerde evangelisatie op dinsdag 8 en woensdag 9 April 1913 gehouden te Amsterdam*. Amsterdam: Kirchner. p. 22-36. The quotes are given in my translation.

<sup>34</sup> Bavinck, *Noodzaak der evangelisatie*, p. 30.

<sup>35</sup> Bavinck, *Noodzaak der evangelisatie*, p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> Bavinck, *Noodzaak der evangelisatie*, p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> Karl Barth, 'Die Unordnung der Welt und Gottes Heilsplan', in: *Evangelische Theologie* 8, 1948/49, pp. 181 - 188.

<sup>38</sup> Bavinck, *noodzaak der evangelisatie*, p. 36.

Although Bavinck, considering the situation of the church of his time talks about inner mission, the same holds for the present confessional church in the Netherlands that is once again becoming aware of its missionary task. The Netherlands are a secularized country in the sense that membership of institutionalized religion is decreasing rapidly. The new generation that is growing up has almost no knowledge of the Christian faith, and does not necessarily share the antipathies towards Christian faith as the preceding generation. This very important renewed interest for (outward) mission in the direct context of the congregation has also effects for the Sunday worship service. The idea that non-believers might be present changes the whole character of the service. This brings us to the second piece I would like to mention.

Bavinck makes an interesting distinction between two different styles of preaching in the collected contributions of Bavinck to the Dutch journal *De Bazuin* called *Vocation and Rebirth*.<sup>39</sup> When a preacher adopts the first style, evangelism [*evangelieprediking*], he presupposes that all his listeners need to become Christians by conversion. In the case of the second style of preaching, community preaching [*gemeenteprediking*], the preacher presupposes that his listeners already belong to the church of Christ. It is the first style that I am particularly interested in. But before I will set off, it is important to note that for Bavinck both styles are one-sided. The latter style simply ignores the fact that there might be people who need to be encouraged to repent and to believe.

The first style also has some deficiencies. Because of the fact that this style of preaching is no more and no less than a call to believe and a call for conversion, it tends to neglect the work of God that precedes this call. It tends to neglect the fact that the listeners might be a part of God's covenant of grace. Furthermore, it does not seem to care what happens after conversion.

The only work the convert are called for, is to go forth and convert others.<sup>40</sup>

Bavinck does not intend to downplay the significance of mission. On the contrary, he is very positive about the work and results of the eighteenth century revivalist movements of John Wesley and others. Yet, his critique is directed at what this style of preaching leaves out. Matthew 28:19 does indeed state that we should go out and preach the gospel to all nations, but Jesus also says that we should teach them to observe all things whatsoever he has commanded us.

It [Evangelism] does lay a foundation, but does not continue to build on this foundation, and therefore runs the risk, that this foundation, because of this unsure footing, and because of unstable composition of its parts, is completely washed away by the storms of unbelief and superstition.<sup>41</sup>

What Jesus has commanded us has repercussions for our work in our family, profession, politics, society, science and art. This typical neo-calvinist slogan reappears here, because a mission style of preaching does not tell us how we can be Christian and housewife, solicitor, nurse, businessman etc. Bavinck affirms the Reformational vision of what Charles Taylor has

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<sup>39</sup> H. Bavinck (1903), *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, Kampen: Zalsman. Quotations from this work are given in my translation.

<sup>40</sup> Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, p. 173.

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, p. 175.

coined as the 'affirmation of ordinary life'.<sup>42</sup> Christian faith must also have something to say about those things that are necessary for us to live, like work, food, community, etc. This area cannot be appreciated by the first style of preaching. In this way, Bavinck warns us that we do not preach the gospel in a one-sided manner. From him we can learn not to presuppose that every listener is a regenerated Christian. But, and that is equally important, we do not presuppose that no is as well. Our worship services should not be changed into a meeting for evangelism. In the worship service the community of Jesus Christ is gathered to praise the creator and redeemer of the world. In this way the believers are strengthened in their faith by the word of God and are prepared for their task to be faithful Christians in their 'ordinary lives', and to be a light on the mountain for all to see.

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Taylor (1989), *Sources of the Self; the making of the modern identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press. p. 209.